

danse macabre Stephen King

STEPHEN

KING'S

--

Danse

Macabre

It's easy enough-perhaps too easy- to memorialize

the dead. This book is for six great writers

of the macabre who are still alive.

ROBERT BLOCH

JORGE LUIS BORGES

RAY BRADBURY

FRANK BELKNAP LONG

DONALD WANDREI

MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Enter, Stranger, at your Riske: Here there be Tygers.

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Forenote

THIS BOOK is in your hands as the result of a telephone call made to me in November of 1978. I was

at that time teaching creative writing and a couple of literature courses at the University of Maine at Orono and working, in whatever spare time I could find, on the final draft of a novel, Firestarter, which will have been published by now. The call was from Bill Thompson, who had edited my first five books (Carrie, 'Salem's Lot, The Shining, Night Shift, and The Stand) in the years 1974-1978. More important than that, Bill Thompson, then an editor at Doubleday, was the first person connected with the New York publishing establishment to read my earlier, unpublished work with sympathetic interest. He was that all-important first contact that new writers wait and wish for . . . and so seldom find.

Doubleday and I came to a parting of the ways following The Stand, and Bill also moved on-he became the senior editor at Everest House, whose imprint you will find on the volume you now hold.

Because we had become friends as well as colleagues over the years of our association, we stayed in touch, had the occasional lunch together . . . and the occasional drinking bout as well. The best one was maybe during the All-Star baseball game in July of 1978, which we watched on a bigscreen

TV over innumerable beers in an Irish pub somewhere in New York. There was a sign over the backbar which advertised an EARLY BIRD HAPPY HOUR, 8-10 A.M. with all drinks priced at fifty cents. When I asked the barkeep what sort of clientele wandered in at 8:15 A.M. for a rum collins or a gin rickey, he fixed me with a baleful smile, wiped his hands on his apron, and said: "College boys . . . like you."

But on this November night not long after Halloween, Bill called me and said, "Why don't you do a book about the entire horror phenomenon as you see it? Books, movies, radio, TV, the whole thing.

We'll do it together, if you want."

The concept intrigued and frightened me at the same time. Intrigued because I've been asked time and time again why I write that stuff, why people want to read it or go to the flicks to see it-the paradox seeming to be, why are people willing to pay good money to be made extremely uncomfortable? I had spoken to enough groups on the subject and written enough words on the subject (including a rather lengthy foreword to my collection of short stories, Night Shift) to make the idea of a Final Statement on the subject an attractive one. Forever after, I thought, I could choke off the subject by saying: if you want to know what I think about horror, there's this

book I wrote on the

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subject. Read that. It's my Final Statement on the clockwork of the horror tale.

It frightened me because I could see the work stretching out over years, decades, centuries. If one

were to begin with Grendel and Grendel's mum and work up from there, even the

Reader's Digest

Condensed Book version would encompass four volumes.

Bill's counter was that I should restrict myself to the last thirty years or so,

with a few side trips to

explore the roots of the genre. I told him I would think about it, and I did. I

thought about it hard and

long. I had never attempted a book-length nonfiction project, and the idea was

intimidating. The

thought of having to tell the truth was intimidating. Fiction, after all, is lies

and more lies . . . which is

why the Puritans could never really get behind it and go with the flow. In a work of

fiction, if you get

stuck you can always just make something up or back up a few pages and change something around.

With nonfiction, there's all that bothersome business of making sure your facts are straight, that the

dates jibe, that the names are spelled right . . . and worst of all, it means being

out front. A novelist,

after all, is a hidden creature; unlike the musician or the actor, he may pass on
any street
unremarked. His Punch-and-Judy creations strut across the stage while he himself
remains unseen.
The writer of nonfiction is all too visible.
Still, the idea had its attractions. I began to understand how the loonies who
preach in Hyde Park
("the nutters," as our British cousins call them) must feel as they drag their
soapboxes into position
and prepare to mount them. I thought of having pages and pages in which to ride all
my
hobbyhorses-"And to be paid for it!" he cried, rubbing his hands together and
cackling madly. I
thought of a lit class I would be teaching the following semester titled Themes in
Supernatural
Literature. But most of all I thought that here was an opportunity to talk about a
genre I love, an
opportunity few plain writers of popular fiction are ever offered.
As for my Themes in Supernatural Literature course: on that November night Bill
called, I was
sitting at the kitchen table with a beer, trying to dope out a syllabus for it . . .
and musing aloud to my
wife that I was shortly going to be spending a lot of time in front of a lot of
people talking about a
subject in which I had previously only felt my way instinctively, like a blind man.
Although many of the

books and films discussed in the pages which follow are now taught routinely in colleges, I read the books, saw the films, and formed my conclusions pretty much on my own, with no texts or scholarly papers of any type to guide my thoughts. It seemed that very shortly I would get to see the true color of my thoughts for the first time.

That may seem a strange phrase. Further along in this book I have written my belief that no one is exactly sure of what they mean on any given subject until they have written their thoughts down; I similarly believe that we have very little understanding of what we have thought until we have submitted those thoughts to others who are at least as intelligent as ourselves. So, yeah, I was

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danse macabre Stephen King nervous at the prospect of stepping into that Barrows Hall classroom, and I spent too much of an otherwise lovely vacation in St. Thomas that year agonizing over Stoker's use of humor in Dracula and the paranoia quotient of Jack Finney's Body Snatchers. In the days following Bill's call, I began to think more and more that if my series of talks (I don't quite have balls enough to call them lectures) on the horror-supernatural-gothic

field seemed well

received-by myself as well as by my students-then perhaps writing a book on the subject would

complete the circle. Finally I called Bill and told him I would try to write the book. And as you can see, I did.

All this is by way of acknowledging Bill Thompson, who created the concept of this book. The idea

was and is a good one. If you like the book which follows, thank Bill, who thought it up. If you don't,

blame the author, who screwed it up.

It is also an acknowledgment of those one hundred Eh-90 students who listened patiently (and

sometimes forgivingly) as I worked out my ideas. As a result of that class, many of these ideas cannot

even be said to be my own, for they were modified during class discussions, challenged, and, in many cases, changed.

During that class, an English professor at the University of Maine, Burton Hatlen, came in to lecture

one day on Stoker's Dracula, and you will find that his insightful thoughts on horror as a potent part of

a myth-pool in which we all bathe communally also form a part of this book's spine.

So, thanks, Burt.

My agent, Kirby McCauley, a fantasy/horror fan and unregenerate Minnesotan, also deserves

thanks for reading this manuscript, pointing out errors of fact, arguing conclusions

. . . and most of all

for sitting up with me one fine drunk night in the U.N. Plaza Hotel in New York and

helping me to

make up the list of recommended horror films during the years 1950-1980 which forms

Appendix 1 of

this book. I owe Kirby for more than that, much more, but for now that will have to do.

I've also drawn upon a good many outside sources during the course of my work in

Danse

Macabre, and have tried as conscientiously as I can to acknowledge these on a

pay-as-you-go basis,

but I must mention a few that were invaluable: Carlos Clarens's seminal work on the

horror film, An

Illustrated History of the Horror Film; the careful episode-by-episode rundown of

The Twilight Zone in

Starlog; The Science Fiction Encyclopedia, edited by Peter Nichols, which was

particularly helpful in

making sense (or trying to, anyway) of the works of Harlan Ellison and of the TV

program The Outer

Limits; and countless other odd byways that I happened to wander down.

Lastly, thanks are due to the writers-Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, Richard

Matheson, Jack

Finney, Peter Straub, and Anne Rivers Siddons among them-who were kind enough to

answer my

letters of enquiry and to provide information about the genesis of the works
discussed here. Their
voices provide a dimension to this work which would otherwise be sadly lacking.
I guess that's about it . . . except I wouldn't want to leave you with any idea

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whatsoever that I
believe what follows even approaches perfection. I suspect plenty of errors still
remain in spite of
careful combing; I can only hope that they are not too serious or too many. If you
find such errors, I
hope you'll write to me and point them out, so I can make corrections in any future
editions. And, you
know, I hope you have some fun with this book. Nosh and nibble at the corners or
read the mother
straight through, but enjoy. That's what it's for, as much as any of the novels.
Maybe there will be
something here to make you think or make you laugh or just make you mad. Any of
those reactions
would please me. Boredom, however, would be a bummer.
For me, writing this book has been both an exasperation and a deep pleasure, a duty
on some
days and a labor of love on others. As a result, I suppose you will find the course
you are about to
follow bumpy and uneven. I can only hope that you will also find, as I have, that
the trip has not been

without its compensations.

STEPHEN KING

Center Lovell, Maine

"What was the worst thing you've ever done?"

"I won't tell you that, but I'll tell you the worst thing that ever happened to me . . . the most dreadful thing . . .

PETER STRAUB, Ghost Story

"Well we'll really have a party but we gotta post a guard outside . . .

EDDIE COCHRAN, "Come On Everybody"

CHAPTER I

October 4, 1957, and an

Invitation to Dance

FOR ME, the terror-the real terror, as opposed to whatever demons and boogeys which might have

been living in my own mind-began on an afternoon in October of 1957. I had just turned ten. And, as

was only fitting, I was in a movie theater: the Stratford Theater in downtown Stratford, Connecticut.

The movie that day was and is one of my all-time favorites, and the fact that it-rather than a

Randolph Scott western or a John Wayne war movie-was playing was also only fitting.

The

Saturday matinee on that day when the real terror began was Earth vs. the Flying Saucers, starring

Hugh Marlowe, who at the time was perhaps best known for his role as Patricia Neal's jilted and rabidly xenophobic boyfriend in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*-a slightly older and altogether more rational science fiction movie.

In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, an alien named Klaatu (Michael Rennie in a bright white intergalactic leisure suit) lands on The Mall in Washington, D.C., in a flying saucer (which, when under power, glows like one of those plastic Jesuses they used to give out at Vacation Bible School for memorizing Bible verses). Klaatu strides down the gangway and pauses there at the foot, the focus of every horrified eye and the muzzles of several hundred Army guns. It is a

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moment of

memorable tension, a moment that is sweet in retrospect-the sort of moment that makes people like

me simple movie fans for life. Klaatu begins fooling with some sort of gadget-it

looked kind of like a

Weed-Eater, as I recall-and a trigger-happy soldier-boy promptly shoots him in the arm. It turns out,

of course, that the gadget was a gift for the President. No death ray here; just a

simple star-to-star

communicator.

That was in 1951. On that Saturday afternoon in Connecticut some
six years later, the folks in the flying saucers looked and acted a good deal less
friendly. Far from the
noble and rather sad good looks of Michael Rennie as Klaatu, the space people in
Earth vs. the
Flying Saucers looked like old and extremely evil living trees, with their gnarled,
shriveled bodies and
their snarling old men's faces.
Rather than bringing a communicator to the President like any new ambassador
bringing a token of
his country's esteem, the saucer people in Earth vs. the Flying Saucers bring death
rays, destruction,
and, ultimately, all-out war. All of this-most particularly the destruction of
Washington, D.C.-was
rendered with marvelous reality by the special effects work of Ray Harryhausen, a
fellow who used to
go to the movies with a chum named Ray Bradbury when he was a kid.
Klaatu comes to extend the hand of friendship and brotherhood. He offers the people
of Earth
membership in a kind of interstellar United Nations-always provided we can put our
unfortunate
habit of killing each other by the millions behind us. The saucerians of Earth vs.
the Flying Saucers
come only to conquer, the last armada of a dying planet, old and greedy, seeking not
peace but

plunder.

The Day the Earth Stood Still is one of a select handful-the real science fiction movies. The

ancient saucerians of Earth vs, the Flying Saucers are emissaries of a much more common breed of

film-the horror-show. No nonsense about "It was to be a gift for your President"

here; these folks

simply descend upon Hugh Marlowe's Project Skyhook at Cape Canaveral and begin kicking ass.

It is in the space between these two philosophies that the terror was seeded, I think. If there is a

line of force between such neatly opposing ideas, then the terror almost certainly grew there.

Because, just as the saucers were mounting their attack on Our Nation's Capital in the movie's final

reel, everything just stopped. The screen went black. The theater was full of kids, but there was

remarkably little disturbance. If you think back to the Saturday matinees of your misspent youth, you

may recall that a bunch of kids at the movies has any number of ways of expressing its pique at the

interruption of the film or its overdue commencement-rhythmic clapping; that great childhood tribal

chant of "We-want-the-show! We-want-the-show! We-want-the-show!"; candy boxes that fly at the

screen; popcorn boxes that become bugles. If some kid has had a Black Cat

firecracker in his pocket

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since the last Fourth of July, he will take this opportunity to remove it, pass it

around to his friends for

their approval and admiration, and then light it and toss it over the balcony.

None of these things happened on that October day. The film hadn't broken; the

projector had

simply been turned off. And then the houselights began to come up, a totally

unheard-of occurrence.

We sat there looking around, blinking in the light like moles.

The manager walked out into the middle of the stage and held his hands up-quite

unnecessarily-for quiet. Six years later, in 1963, I flashed on that moment when,

one Friday

afternoon in November, the guy who drove us home from school told us that the

President had been

shot in Dallas.

2

If there is any truth or worth to the danse macabre, it is simply that novels,

movies, TV and radio

programs-even the comic books-dealing with horror always do their work on two

levels.

On top is the "gross-out" level-when Regan vomits in the priest's face or

masturbates with a

crucifix in *The Exorcist*, or when the raw-looking, terribly inside-out monster in

John Frankenheimer's

Prophecy crunches off the helicopter pilot's head like a Tootsie-Pop. The gross-out can be done with

varying degrees of artistic finesse, but it's always there.

But on another, more potent level, the work of horror really is a dance-a moving, rhythmic search.

And what it's looking for is the place where you, the viewer or the reader, live at your most primitive

level. The work of horror is not interested in the civilized furniture of our lives.

Such a work dances

through these rooms which we have fitted out one piece at a time, each piece expressing-we

hope!-our socially acceptable and pleasantly enlightened character. It is in search of another place,

a room which may sometimes resemble the secret den of a Victorian gentleman, sometimes the

torture chamber of the Spanish Inquisition . . . but perhaps most frequently and most successfully, the

simple and brutally plain hole of a Stone Age cave-dweller.

Is horror art? On this second level, the work of horror can be nothing else; it achieves the level of

art simply because it is looking for something beyond art, something that predates art: it is looking for

what I would call phobic pressure points. The good horror tale will dance its way to the center of your

life and find the secret door to the room you believed no one but you knew of-as

both Albert Camus

and Billy Joel have pointed out, The Stranger makes us nervous . . . but we love to

try on his face in

secret.

Do spiders give you the horrors? Fine. We'll have spiders, as in Tarantula, The

Incredible Shrinking

Man, and Kingdom of the, Spiders. What about rats? In James Herbert's novel of the

same name,

you can feel them crawl all over you . . . and eat you alive. How about snakes? That

shut-in feeling?

Heights? Or . . . whatever there is.

Because books and movies are mass media, the field of horror has often been able to

do better

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than even these personal fears over the last thirty years. During that period (and

to a lesser degree,

in the seventy or so years preceding), the horror genre has often been able to find

national phobic

pressure points, and those books and films which have been the most successful

almost always

seem to play upon and express fears which exist across a wide spectrum of people.

Such fears,

which are often political, economic, and psychological rather than supernatural,

give the best work of

horror a pleasing allegorical feel-and it's the one sort of allegory that most filmmakers seem at home with. Maybe because they know that if the shit starts getting too thick, they can always bring the monster shambling out of the darkness again.

We're going back to Stratford in 1957 before much longer, but before we do, let me suggest that one of the films of the last thirty years to find a pressure point with great accuracy was Don Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Further along, we'll discuss the novel-and Jack Finney, the author, will also have a few things to say-but for now, let's look briefly at the film.

There is nothing really physically horrible in the Siegel version of Invasion of the Body Snatchers; * no gnarled and evil star travelers here, no twisted, mutated shape under the facade of normality. The pod people are just a little different, that's all. A little vague. A little messy.

Although Finney never puts this fine a point on it in his book, he certainly suggests that the most horrible thing about "them" is that they lack even the most common and easily attainable sense of aesthetics. Never mind, Finney suggests, that these usurping aliens from outer space can't appreciate La Traviata or Moby Dick or even a good Norman Rockwell cover on the Saturday Evening Post. That's bad enough, but-my

God!-they don't mow their lawns or replace the pane of garage glass that got broken when the kid down the street batted a baseball through it. They don't repaint their houses when they get flaky. The roads leading into Santa Mira, we're told, are so full of potholes and washouts that pretty soon the salesmen who service the town-who aerate its municipal lungs with the life-giving atmosphere of capitalism, you might say-will soon no longer bother to come.

*There is in the Philip Kaufman remake, though. There is a moment in that film which is repulsively horrible. It comes when Donald Sutherland uses a rake to smash in the face of a mostly formed pod. This "person's" face breaks in with sickening ease, like a rotted piece of fruit, and lets out an explosion of the most realistic stage blood that I have ever seen in a color film. When that moment came I winced, clapped a hand over my mouth . . and wondered how in the hell the movie had ever gotten its PG rating.

The gross-out level is one thing, but it is on that second level of horror that we often experience that low sense of anxiety which we call "the creeps." Over the years, Invasion of the Body Snatchers has given a lot of people the creeps, and all sorts of high-flown ideas have been imputed to Siegel's film version. It was seen as an anti-McCarthy film until someone pointed out the

fact that Don Siegel's

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political views could hardly be called leftish. Then people began seeing it as a

"better dead than Red"

picture. Of the two ideas, I think that second one better fits the film that Siegel

made, the picture that

ends with Kevin McCarthy in the middle of a freeway, screaming "They're coming!

They're coming" to

cars which rush heedlessly by him. But in my heart, I don't really believe that

Siegel was wearing a

political hat at all when he made the movie (and you will see later that Jack Finney

has never

believed it, either); I believe he was simply having fun and that the undertones . .

. just happened.

This doesn't invalidate the idea that there is an allegorical element in Invasion of

the Body

Snatchers; it is simply to suggest that sometimes

these pressure points, these terminals of fear, are so deeply buried and yet so

vital that we may tap

them like artesian wells-saying one thing out loud while we express something else

in a whisper.

The Philip Kaufman version of Finney's novel is fun (although, to be fair, not quite

as much fun as

Siegel's) , but that whisper has changed into something entirely different: the

subtext of Kaufman's

picture seems to satirize the whole

I'm-okay-you're-okay-so-let's-get-in-the-hot-tub-and-massage-our-precious-consciousness

movement

of the egocentric seventies. Which is to suggest that, although the uneasy dreams of

the mass

subconscious may change from decade to decade, the pipeline into that well of dreams

remains

constant and vital.

This is the real danse macabre, I suspect: those remarkable moments when the creator

of a horror

story is able to unite the conscious and subconscious mind with one potent idea. I

believe it

happened to a greater degree with the Siegel version of Invasion of the Body

Snatchers, but of

course both Siegel and Kaufman were able to proceed courtesy of Jack Finney, who

sank the original

well.

All of which brings us back, I think, to the Stratford Theater on a warm fall

afternoon in 1957.

3

We sat there in our seats like dummies, staring at the manager. He looked nervous

and sallow-or

perhaps that was only the footlights. We sat wondering what sort of catastrophe

could have caused

him to stop the movie just as it was reaching that apotheosis of all Saturday

matinee shows, "the
good part." And the way his voice trembled when he spoke did not add to anyone's
sense of
well-being.

"I want to tell you," he said in that trembly voice, "that the Russians have put a
space satellite into
orbit around the earth. They call it . . . Sputnik."

This piece of intelligence was greeted by absolute, tomblike silence. We just sat
there, a theaterful
of 1950s kids with crew cuts, white cuts, ponytails, ducktails, crinolines, chinos,
jeans with cuffs,

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Captain Midnight rings; kids who had just discovered Chuck Berry and Little Richard
on New York's

one black rhythm and blues station, which we
could get at night, wavering in and out like a powerful jive language from a distant
planer. We were

the, kids who grew up on Captain Video and Terry and the Pirates. We were the kids
who had seen

Combat Casey kick the teeth out of North Korean gooks without number in the comic
books. We were

the kids who saw Richard Carlson catch thousands of dirty Commie spies in I Led
Three Lives. We

were the kids who had ponied up a quarter apiece to watch Hugh Marlowe in Earth vs.
the Flying

Saucers and got this piece of upsetting news as a kind of nasty bonus.

I remember this very clearly: cutting through that awful dead silence came one

shrill voice, whether

that of a boy or a girl I do not know; a voice that was near tears but that was also

full of a frightening

anger: "Oh, go show the movie, you liar!"

The manager did not even look toward the place from which that voice had come, and

that was

somehow the worst thing of all. Somehow that proved it. The Russians had beaten us

into space.

Somewhere over our heads, beeping triumphantly, was an electronic ball which had

been launched

and constructed behind the Iron Curtain. Neither Captain Midnight nor Richard

Carlson (who also

starred in Riders to the Stars; and oh boy, the bitter irony in that) had been able

to stop it. It was up

there. . . and they called it Sputnik. The manager stood there for a moment longer,

looking out at us

as if he wished he had something else to say but could not think what it might be.

Then he walked off

and pretty soon the movie started up again.

4

So here's a question. You remember where you were when President Kennedy was

assassinated.

You remember where you were when you heard that RFK had taken a dive in some hotel

kitchen as

the result of another crazy. Maybe you even remember where you were during the Cuban missile crisis.

Do you remember where you were when the Russians launched Sputnik I?

Terror-what Hunter Thompson calls "fear and loathing"-often arises from a pervasive sense of

disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking. If that sense of unmaking is sudden and seems

personal-if it hits you around the heart-then it lodges in the memory as a complete set. Just the fact

that almost everyone remembers where he/she was at the instant he/she heard the news of the

Kennedy assassination is something I find almost as interesting as the fact that one nurd with a

mailorder gun was able to change the entire course of world history in just

fourteen seconds or so. That moment of knowledge and the three-day spasm of stunned grief which

followed it is perhaps the closest any people in history has ever come to a total period of mass

consciousness and mass empathy and-in retrospect-mass memory: two hundred million people in

a living frieze. Love cannot achieve that sort of across-the-board hammerstrike of

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emotion,

apparently. More's the pity.

I'm not suggesting that the news of Sputnik's launching had anywhere near the same sort of effect

on the American psyche (although it was not without effect; see, for instance, Tom Wolfe's amusing

narrative of events following the successful Russian launch in his superlative book about our space

program, *The Right Stuff*), but I am guessing that a great many kids-the war babies, we were

called-remember the event as well as I do.

We were fertile ground for the seeds of terror, we war babies; we had been raised in a strange

circus atmosphere of paranoia, patriotism, and national hubris. We were told that we were the

greatest nation on earth and that any Iron Curtain outlaw who tried to draw down on us in that great

saloon of international politics would discover who the fastest gun in the West was (as in Pat Frank's

illuminating novel of the period, *Alas, Babylon*), but we were also told exactly what to keep in our

fallout shelters and how long we would have to stay in there after we won the war.

We had more to

eat than any nation in the history of the world, but there were traces of

Strontium-90 in our milk from

nuclear testing.

We were the children of the men and women who won what Duke Wayne used to call "the big one," and when the dust cleared, America was on top. We had replaced England as the colossus that stood astride the world. When the folks got together again to make me and millions of kids like me, London had been bombed almost flat, the sun was setting every twelve hours or so on the British Empire, and Russia had been bled nearly white in its war against the Nazis; during the siege of Stalingrad, Russian soldiers had been reduced to dining on their dead comrades. But not a single bomb had fallen on New York, and America had the lightest casualty rate of any major power involved in the war. Further, we had a great history to draw upon (all short histories are great histories), particularly in matters of invention and innovation. Every grade-school teacher produced the same two words for the delectation of his/her students; two magic words glittering and glowing like a beautiful neon sign; two words of almost incredible power and grace; and these two words were: PIONEER SPIRIT. I and my fellow kids grew up secure in this knowledge of America's PIONEER SPIRIT-a knowledge that could be summed up in a litany of names learned by rote in the classroom. Eli

Whitney. Samuel

Morse. Alexander Graham Bell. Henry Ford. Robert Goddard. Wilbur and Orville Wright.

Robert

Oppenheimer. These men, ladies and gentlemen, all had one great thing in common.

They were all

Americans simply bursting with PIONEER SPIRIT. We were and always had been, in that

pungent

American phrase, fastest and bestest with the mostest.

And what a world stretched ahead! It was all outlined in the stories of Robert A.

Heinlein, Lester del

Rey, Alfred Bester, Stanley Weinbaum, and dozens of others! These dreams came in the

last of the

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science fiction pulp magazines, which were shrinking and dying by that October in

1957 . . . but

science fiction itself had never been in better shape. Space would be more than

conquered, these

writers told us; it would . . . it would be . . . why, it would be PIONEERED! Silver

needles piercing the

void, followed by flaming rockets lowering huge ships onto alien worlds, followed by

hardy colonies

full of men and women (American men and women, need one add) with PIONEER SPIRIT

bursting

from every pore. Mars would become our backyard, the new gold rush (or possibly the

new rhodium

rush) might well be in the asteroid belt . . . and ultimately, of course, the stars

themselves would be

ours-a glorious future awaited with tourists snapping Kodak prints of the six moons

of Procyon IV

and a Chevrolet JetCar assembly line on Sirius III. Earth itself would be

transformed into a utopia that

you could see on the cover of any '50s issue of Fantasy and Science Fiction,

Amazing Stories,

Galaxy, or Astounding Stories.

A future filled with the PIONEER SPIRIT; even better, a future filled with the

AMERICAN PIONEER

SPIRIT. See, for example, the cover of the original Bantam paperback edition of Ray

Bradbury's

Martian Chronicles. In this artistic vision-a figment of the artist's imagination

and not of Bradbury's;

there is nothing so ethnocentric or downright silly in this classic melding of

science fiction and

fantasy-the landing space travelers look a great deal like gyrenes storming up the

beach at Saipan

or Tarawa. It's a rocket instead of an LST in the background, true, but their

jut-jawed,

automatic-brandishing commander might have stepped right out of a John Wayne movie:

"Come on,

you suckers, do you want to live forever? Where's your PIONEER SPIRIT?"

This was the cradle of elementary political theory and technological dreamwork in

which I and a

great many other war babies were rocked until that day in October, when the cradle

was rudely

upended and all of us fell out. For me, it was the end of the sweet dream . . . and

the beginning of the

nightmare.

The children grasped the implication of what the Russians had done as well and as

quickly as

anyone else-certainly as fast as the politicians who were falling all over

themselves to cut the good

lumber out of this nasty deadfall. The big bombers that had smashed Berlin and

Hamburg in World

War II were even then, in 1957, becoming obsolete. A new and ominous abbreviation

had come into

the working vocabulary of terror: ICBM. The ICBMS, we understood, were only the

German V-rockets

grown up. They would carry enormous payloads of nuclear death and destruction, and

if the Russkies

tried anything funny, we would simply blow them right off the face of the earth.

Watch out, Moscow!

Here comes a big, hot dose of the PIONEER SPIRIT for you, you turkeys!

Except that somehow, incredibly, the Russians were looking pretty good in the old

ICBM

department themselves. After all, ICBMs were only big rockets, and the Commies

certainly hadn't

lofted Sputnik I into orbit with a potato masher.

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And in that context, the movie began again in Stratford, with the ominous, warbling voices of the

saucerians echoing everywhere: "Look to your skies . . . a warning will come from your skies . . . look

to your skies . . ."

5

This book is intended to be an informal overview of where the horror genre has been over the last

thirty years, and not an autobiography of yours truly. The autobiography of a father, writer, and

ex-high school teacher would make dull reading indeed. I am a writer by trade, which means that the

most interesting things that have happened to me have happened in my dreams.

But because I am a horror novelist and also a child of my times, and because I believe that horror

does not horrify unless the reader or viewer has been personally touched, you will find the

autobiographical element constantly creeping in. Horror in real life is an emotion that one grapples

with-as I grappled with the realization that the Russians had beaten us into space-all alone. It is a

combat waged in the secret recesses of the heart.

I believe that we are all ultimately alone and that any deep and lasting human

contact is nothing

more nor less than a necessary illusion-but at least the feelings which we think of

as "positive" and

"constructive" are a reaching-out, an effort to make contact and establish some sort

of

communication. Feelings of love and kindness, the ability to care and empathize, are

all we know of

the light. They are efforts to link and integrate; they are the emotions which

brings us together, if not

in fact then at least in a comforting illusion that makes the burden of mortality a

little easier to bear.

Horror, terror, fear, panic: these are the emotions which drive wedges between us,

split us off from

the crowd, and make us alone. It is paradoxical that feelings and emotions we

associate with the

"mob instinct" should do this, but crowds are lonely places to be, we're told, a

fellowship with no love

in it. The melodies of the horror tale are simple and repetitive, and they are

melodies of

disestablishment and disintegration. . . but another paradox is that the ritual

outletting of these

emotions seems to bring things back to a more stable and constructive state again.

Ask any

psychiatrist what his patient is doing when he lies there on the couch and talks

about what keeps him

awake and what he sees in his dreams. What do you see when you turn out the light?

the Beatles

asked; their answer: I can't tell you, but I know that it's mine.

The genre we're talking about, whether it be in terms of books, film, or TV, is

really all one:

make-believe horrors. And one of the questions that frequently comes up, asked by

people who have

grasped the paradox (but perhaps not fully articulated it in their own minds) is:

Why do you want to

make up horrible things when there is so much real horror in the world?

The answer seems to be that we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.

With the

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endless inventiveness of humankind, we grasp the very elements which are so divisive

and

destructive and try to turn them into tools-to dismantle themselves. The term

catharsis is as old as

Greek drama, and it has been used rather too glibly by some practitioners in my

field to justify what

they do, but it still has its limited uses here. The dream of horror is in itself an

out-letting and a lancing

. . . and it may well be that the mass-media dream of horror can sometimes become a

nationwide

analyst's couch.

So, for the final time before we push on, October of 1957; Now, absurd as it looks

on the face of it,
Earth vs. the Flying Saucers has become a symbolic political statement. Below its
pulpy
invaders-from-space storyline, it becomes a preview of the ultimate war. Those
greedy, twisted old
monsters piloting the saucers are really the Russians; the destruction of the
Washington Monument,
the Capitol dome, and the Supreme Court-all rendered with graphic, eerie
believability by
Harryhausen's stop-motion effects-becomes nothing less than the destruction one
would logically
expect when the A-bombs finally fly.
And then the end of the movie comes. The last saucer has been shot down by Hugh
Marlowe's
secret weapon, an ultrasonic gun that interrupts the electromagnetic drive of the
flying saucers, or
some sort of similar agreeable foolishness. Loudspeakers blare from every Washington
street corner,
seemingly: "The present danger . . . is over. The present danger . . . is over. The
present danger is
over." The camera shows us clear skies. The evil old monsters with their frozen
snarls and their
twisted-root faces have been vanquished. We cut to a California beach, magically
deserted except for
Hugh Marlowe and his new wife (who is, of course, the daughter of the Crusty Old

Military Man Who

Died For His Country); they are on their honeymoon.

"Russ," she ask him, "will they ever come back?"

Marlowe looks sagely up at the sky, then back at his wife. "Not on such a pretty day," he say

comfortingly. "And not to such a nice world."

They run hand in hand into the surf, and the end credits roll.

For a moment-just for a moment-the paradoxical trick has worked. We have taken horror in

hand and used it to destroy itself, a trick akin to pulling one's self up by one's own bootstraps. For a

little while the deeper fear-the reality of the Russian Sputnik and what it means-has been excised.

It will grow back again, but that is for later. For now, the worst has been faced and it wasn't so bad

after all. There was that magic moment of reintegration and safety at the end, that same feeling that

comes when the roller coaster stops at the end of its run and you get off with your best girl, both of

you whole and unhurt.

I believe it's this feeling of reintegration, arising from a field specializing in death, fear, and

monstrosity, that make the danse macabre so rewarding and magical . . . that, and the boundless

ability of the human imagination to create endless dreamworlds and then put them to work. It is a

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world which a fine poet such as Anne Sexton was able to use to "write herself sane."

From her poems

expressing and delineating her descent into the maelstrom of insanity, her own

ability to cope with the

world eventually returned, at least for awhile . . . and perhaps others have been

able to use her

poems in their turn. This is not to suggest that writing must be justified on the

basis of its usefulness;

to simply delight the reader is enough, isn't it?

This is a world I've lived in of my own choosing since I was a kid, since long

before the Stratford

Theater and Sputnik I. I am certainly not trying to tell you that the Russians

traumatized me into an

interest in horror fiction, but am simply pointing out that instant when I began to

sense a useful

connection between the world of fantasy and that of what My Weekly Reader used to

call Current

Events. This book is only my ramble through that world, through all the worlds of

fantasy and horror

that have delighted and terrified me. It comes with very little plan or order, and

if you are sometimes

reminded of a hunting dog with a substandard nose casting back and forth and

following any trace of

interesting scent it happens to come across, that is fine with me.

But it's not a hunt. It's a dance. And sometimes they turn off the lights in this ballroom.

But we'll dance anyway, you and I. Even in the dark. Especially in the dark.

May I have the pleasure?

CHAPTER II

Tales of the Hook

THE FIRST ISSUE of Forrest Ackerman's gruesomely jovial magazine Famous Monsters of Filmland

that I ever bought contained a long, almost scholarly article by Robert Bloch on the difference

between science fiction films and horror films. It was an interesting piece of work, and while I do not

recall all of it after eighteen years, I do remember Bloch saying that the Howard Hawks/Christian

Nyby collaboration on The Thing (based on John W. Campbell's classic science fiction novella "Who

Goes There?") was science fiction to the core in spite of its scary elements, and that the later film

Them!, about giant ants spawned in the New Mexico desert (as the result of A-bomb tests, naturally),

was a pure horror film in spite of its science fiction trappings.

This dividing line between fantasy and science fiction (for properly speaking, fantasy is what it is;

the horror genre is only a subset of the larger genre) is a subject that comes up at some point at

almost every fantasy or science fiction convention held (and for those of you
unaware of the
subculture, there are literally hundreds each year). If I had a nickel for every
letter printed on the
fantasy/sf dichotomy in the columns of the amateur magazines and the prozines of
both fields, I could
buy the island of Bermuda.

It's a trap, this matter of definition, and I can't think of a more boring academic
subject. Like
endless discussions of breath units in modern poetry or the possible intrusiveness
of some
punctuation in the short story, it is really a discussion of how many angels can

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dance on the head of a
pin, and not really interesting unless those involved in the discussion are drunk or
graduate
students-two states of roughly similar incompetence. I'll content myself with
stating the obvious
inarguables: both are works of the imagination, and both try to create worlds which
do not exist,
cannot exist, or do not exist yet. There is a difference, of course, but you can
draw your own
borderline, if you want- and if you
try, you may find that it's a very squiggly border indeed. Alien, for instance, is a

horror movie even

though it is more firmly grounded in scientific projection than Star Wars. Star Wars is a science fiction

film, although we must recognize the fact that it's sf of the E. E. "Doc"

Smith/Murray Leinster

whack-and-slash school: an outer space western just overflowing with PIONEER SPIRIT.

Somewhere in between these two, in a buffer zone that has been little used by the movies, are

works that seem to combine science fiction and fantasy in a nonthreatening way-Close

Encounters

of the Third Kind, for instance.

With such a number of divisions (and any dedicated science fiction or fantasy fan could offer a

dozen more, ranging from Utopian Fiction, Negative Utopian Fiction, Sword and Sorcery, Heroic

Fantasy, Future History, and on into the sunset), you can see why I don't want to open this particular

door any wider than I have to.

Let me, instead of defining, offer a couple of examples, and then we'll move along-and what

better example than Donovan's Brain?

Horror fiction doesn't necessarily have to be nonscientific. Curt Siodmak's novel Donovan's Brain

moves from a scientific basis to outright horror (as did Alien). It was adapted twice for the screen, and

both versions enjoyed fair popular success. Both the novel and the films focus on a

scientist who, if
not quite mad, is certainly operating at the far borders of rationality. Thus we can
place him in a direct
line of descent from the original Mad Labs proprietor, Victor Frankenstein.* This
scientist has been
experimenting with a technique designed to keep the brain alive after the body has
died-specifically,
in a tank filled with an electrically charged saline solution.

*And on back to Faust? Daedalus? Prometheus? Pandora? A genealogy leading straight
back into the mouth of hell if
ever there was one!

In the course of the novel, the private plane of W. D. Donovan, a rich and
domineering millionaire,
crashes near the scientist's desert lab. Recognizing the knock of opportunity, the
scientist removes
the dying millionaire's skull and pops Donovan's brain into his tank.
So far, so good. This story has elements of both horror and science fiction; at this
point it could go
either way, depending on Siodmak's handling of the subject. The earlier version of
the film tips its
hand almost at once: the removal operation takes place in a howling thunderstorm and
the scientist's
Arizona laboratory looks more like Baskerville Hall. And neither film version is up
to the tale of

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mounting terror Siodmak tells in his careful, rational prose. The operation is a success. The brain is

alive and possibly even thinking in its tank of cloudy liquid. The problem now becomes one of

communication. The scientists begins trying to contact the brain by means of telepathy . . . and finally

succeeds. In a half-trance, he writes the name W. D. Donovan three or four times on a scrap of

paper, and comparison shows that his signature is interchangeable with that of the millionaire.

In its tank, Donovan's brain begins to change and mutate. It grows stronger, more able to dominate

our young hero. He begins to do Donovan's bidding, said bidding all revolving around Donovan's

psychopathic determination to make sure the right person inherits his fortune. The scientist begins to

experience the frailties of Donovan's physical body (now moldering in an unmarked grave): low back

pain, a decided limp. As the story builds to its climax, Donovan tries to use the scientist to run down a

little girl who stands in the way of his implacable, monstrous will.

In one of its film incarnations, the Beautiful Young Wife (no comparable creature exists in

Siodmak's novel) rigs up lightning rods, which zap the brain in its tank. At the end of the book, the

scientist attacks the tank with an ax, resisting the endless undertow of Donovan's will by reciting a simple yet haunting mnemonic phrase-He thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts. The glass shatters, the saline solution pours out, and the loathsome, pulsing brain is left to die like a slug on the laboratory floor.

Donovan's Brain is a fine thinker and an okay writer. The flow of his speculative ideas in

is as exciting to follow as the flow of ideas in a novel by Isaac Asimov or Arthur

C. Clarke or my

personal favorite in the field, the late John Wyndham. But none of those esteemed gentlemen has

ever written a novel quite like *Donovan's Brain* . . . in fact, no one has.

The final tip-off comes at the very end of the book, when Donovan's nephew (or perhaps it was his

bastard son, I'll be damned if I can remember which) is hanged for murder. * Three times the

scaffold's trapdoor refuses to open when the switch is thrown, and the narrator speculates that

Donovan's spirit still remains, indomitable, implacable . . . and hungry.

*You can see why Donovan liked the kid enough to want to leave him his money, I think. Just a chip off the old block.

For all its scientific trappings, *Donovan's Brain* is as much a horror story as M. R.

James's "Casting

the Runes" or H. P. Lovecraft's nominal science fiction tale, "The Colour Out of Space."

Now let's take another story, this one an oral tale of the sort that never has to be written down. It is

simply passed mouth to mouth, usually around Boy Scout or Girl Scout campfires after the sun has

gone down and marshmallows have been poked onto green sticks to roast above the coals. You've

heard it, I guess, but instead of summarizing it, I'd like to tell it as I

originally heard it, gape-mouthed

with terror, as the sun went down behind the vacant lot in Stratford where we used

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to play scratch

baseball when there were enough guys around to make up two teams. Here is the most

basic horror

story I know:

"This guy and his girl go out on a date, you know? And they go parking up on Lover's

Lane. So

anyway, while they're driving up there, the radio breaks in with this bulletin. The

guy says this

dangerous homicidal maniac named The Hook has just escaped from the Sunnydale Asylum

for the

Criminally Insane. They call him The Hook because that's what he's got instead of a

right hand, this

razor-sharp hook, and he used to hang around these lover's lanes, you know, and he'd

catch these

people making out and cut their heads off with the hook. He could do that 'cause it

was so sharp, you

know, and when they caught him they found like about fifteen or twenty heads in his

refrigerator. So

the news guy says to be on the lookout for any guy with a hook instead o f a hand,

and to stay away

from any dark, lonely sots where people go to, you know, get it on.

"So the girl says, Let's go home, okay? And the guy-he's this real big guy, you

know, with

muscles on his muscles- he says, I'm not scared of that guy, and he's probably miles

from here

anyway. So she goes, Come on, Louie, I'm scared, Sunnydale Asylum isn't that far

from here. Let's

go back to my house. I'll make popcorn and we can watch TV,

"But the guy won't listen to her and pretty soon they're up on The Outlook, parked

at the end o f the

road, makin' out like bandidos. Bart she keeps sayin' she wants to go home because

they're the only

car there, you know. That stuff about The Hook scared away everybody else. But he

keeps sayin',

Come on, don't be such a chicken, there's nothin' to be afraid of, and if there was

I'd protectcha, stuff

like that.

"So they keep makin' out for awhile and then she hears a noise-like a breakin'

branch or

something. Like someone is out there in the woods, creepin' up on them. So then she gets real upset,

hysterical, trine and everything. like girls do. She's beggin' the guy to take her home. The guy keeps

sayin' he doesn't hear anything at all, but she looks up in the rearview mirror and thinks she sees

someone all hunkered down at the back o f the car, just peekin' in at them, and grinnin'. She says if

he doesn't take her home she's never gonna go out parkin' with him again and all that happy crappy.

So finally he starts up the car and really peels out cause he's so jacked-off at her. In fact, he just about cracks them up.

"So anyway, they get home, you know, and the guy goes around to open her door for her, and

when he gets there he just stands there, turnin' as white as a sheet, and his eyes are gettin' so big

you'd think they was gonna fall out on his shoes. She says Louie, what's wrong? And he just faints

dead away, right there on the sidewalk.

"She gets out to see what's wrong, and when she slams the car door she hears this funny clinking

sound and turns around to see what it is. And there, hanging from the doorhandle, is

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this razor-sharp

hook."

The story of *The Hook* is a simple, brutal classic of horror. It offers no

characterization, no theme, no

particular artifice; it does not aspire to symbolic beauty or try to summarize the

times, the mind, or the

human spirit. To find these things we must go to "literature"-perhaps to Flannery

O'Connor's story "A

Good Man Is Hard to Find," which is very much like the story of *The Hook* in its plot

and construction.

No, the story of *The Hook* exists for one reason and one reason alone: to scare the

shit out of little

kids after the sun goes down.

One could jigger the story of *The Hook* to make him-it-a creature from outer space,

and you

could attribute this creature's ability to travel across the parsecs to a photon

drive or a warp drive; you

could make it a creature from an alternate earth à la Clifford D. Simak. But none of

these sf

conventions would turn the story of *The Hook* into science fiction. It's a

flesh-crawler pure and simple,

and in its direct point-to-point progress, its brevity, and its use of story only as

a means to get to the

effect in the last sentence, it is remarkably similar to John Carpenter's *Halloween*

("It was the

boogeyman," Jamie Lee Curtis says at the end of that film. "Yes," Donald Pleasance agrees softly.

"As a matter of fact, it was.") or The Fog. Both of these movies are extremely frightening, but the story of The Hook was there first.

The point seems to be that horror simply is, exclusive of definition or rationalization. In a

Newsweek cover story titled "Hollywood's Scary Summer" (referring to the summer of 1979-the

summer of Phantasm, Prophecy, Dawn of the Dead, Nightwing, and Alien) the writer said that, during

Alien's big, scary scenes, the audience seemed more apt to moan with revulsion than to scream with

terror. The truth of this can't be argued; it's bad enough to see a gelatinous crab-thing spread over

some fellow's face, but the infamous "chest-burster" scene which follows is a quantum leap in grue . .

. and it happens at the dinner table, yet. It's enough to put you off your popcorn.

The closest I want to come to definition or rationalization is to suggest that the genre exists on

three more or less separate levels, each one a little less fine than the one before it. The finest

emotion is terror, that emotion which is called up in the tale of The Hook and also in that hoary old

classic, "The Monkey's Paw." We actually see nothing outright nasty in either story; in one we have

the hook and in the other there is the paw, which, dried and mummified, can surely
be no worse than

those plastic dogturds on sale at any novelty shop. It's what the mind sees that
makes these stories

such quintessential tales of terror. It is the unpleasant speculation called to mind
when the knocking

on the door begins in the latter story and the grief-stricken old woman rushes to
answer it. Nothing is

there but the wind when she finally throws the door open . . . but what, the mind
wonders, might have

been there if her husband had been a little slower on the draw with that third wish?

As a kid, I cut my teeth on William B. Gainer's horror comics- Weird Science, Tales

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from the Crypt,

Tales from the Vault-plus all the Gaines imitators (but like a good Elvis record,

the Gaines

magazines were often imitated, never duplicated). These horror comics of the fifties

still sum up for

me the epitome of horror, that emotion of fear that underlies terror, an emotion

which is slightly less

fine, because it is not entirely of the mind. Horror also invites a physical

reaction by showing us

something which is physically wrong.

One typical E.C. screamer goes like this: The hero's wife and her boyfriend

determine to do away

with the hero so they can run away together and get married. In almost all the weird comics of the

'50s, the women are seen as slightly overripe, enticingly fleshy and sexual, but ultimately evil:

castrating, murdering bitches who, like the trapdoor spider, feel an almost instinctual need to follow

intercourse with cannibalism. These two heels, who might have stepped whole and breathing from a

James M. Cain novel, take the poor slob of a husband for a ride and the boyfriend puts a bullet

between his eyes. They wire a cement block to the corpse's leg and toss him over a bridge into the river.

Two or three weeks later, our hero, a living corpse, emerges from the river, rotted and eaten by the

fish. He shambles after wifey and her friend . . . and not to invite them back to his place for a few

drinks, either, one feels. One piece of dialogue from this story which I've never forgotten is, "I am

coming, Marie, but I have to come slowly . . . because little pieces of me keep falling off . . ."

In "The Monkey's Paw," the imagination alone is stimulated. The reader does the job on himself. In

the horror comics (as well as the horror pulps of the years 1930-1955), the viscera are also engaged.

As we have already pointed out, the old man in "The Monkey's Paw" is able to wish the dreadful

apparition away before his frenzied wife can get the door open. In Tales from the Crypt, the Thing from Beyond the Grave is still there when the door is thrown wide, big as life and twice as ugly.

Terror is the sound of the old man's continuing pulsebeat in "The Tell-Tale Heart"-a quick sound,

"like a watch wrapped in cotton." Horror is the amorphous but very physical "thing" in Joseph Payne

Brennan's wonderful novella "Slime" as it enfolds itself over the body of a screaming dog.*

*No less a writer than Kate Wilhelm, the acclaimed mainstream and science fiction novelist (author of Where Late the

Sweet Birds Sang and The Clewiston Test, among others), began her career with a short but gruesomely effective horror

novel-a paperback original called The Clone, written in collaboration with Ted Thomas. In this story, an amorphous

creature made of almost pure protein (more blob than clone, The Science Fiction Encyclopedia rightly points out) forms in

the sewer system of a major city . . . around a nucleus of half-frosted hamburger, yet. It begins to grow, swallowing

hundreds of people into its noxious self as it does. In one memorable scene, a little kid is yanked arm-first into the drain of

the kitchen sink.

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But there is a third level-that of revulsion. This seems to be where the

"chest-burster" from Alien fits.

Better, let's take another example from the E.C. file as an example of the Revolting
Story-Jack

Davis's "Foul Play" from The Crypt of Terror will serve nicely, I think. And if

you're sitting in your living

room right now, putting away some chips and dip or maybe some sliced pepperoni on
crackers as

you read this, maybe you'd just better put the munchies away for awhile, because
this one makes the

chest-burster from Alien look like a scene from The Sound of Music, You'll note that
the story lacks

any real logic, motivation, or character development, but, as in the tale of The
Hook, the story itself is

little more than the means to an end, a way of getting to those last three panels.

"Foul Play" is the story of Herbie Satten, pitcher for Bayville's minor league
baseball team. Herbie

is the apotheosis of the E.C. villain. He's a totally black character, with
absolutely no redeeming

qualities, the Compleat Monster. He's murderous, conceited, egocentric, willing to
go to any lengths

to win. He brings out the Mob Man or Mob Woman in each of us; we would gladly see
Herbie lynched

from the nearest apple tree, and never mind the Civil Liberties Union.

With his team leading by a single run in the top of the ninth, Herbie gets first base by deliberately allowing himself to be hit by an inside pitch. Although he is big and lumbering, he takes off for second on the very next pitch. Covering second in Central City's saintly slugger, Jerry Deegan. Deegan, we are told, is "sure to win the game for the home team in the bottom of the ninth." The evil Herbie Satten slides into second with his spikes up, but saintly Jerry hangs in there and tags Satten out. Jerry is spiked, but his wounds are minor . . . or so they appear. In fact, Herbie has painted his spikes with a deadly, fast-acting poison. In Central City's half of the ninth, Jerry comes to the plate with two out and a man in scoring position. It looks pretty good for the home team guys; unfortunately, Jerry drops dead at home plate even as the umpire calls strike three. Exit the malefic Herbie Satten, smirking.

The Central City team doctor discovers that Jerry has been poisoned. One of the Central City players says grimly: "This is a job for the police!" Another responds ominously, "No! Wait! Let's take care of him ourselves . . . our way."

The team sends Herbie a letter, inviting him to the ballpark one night to be

presented with a plaque

honoring his achievements in baseball. Herbie, apparently as stupid as he is evil,
falls for it, and in the

next scene we see the Central City nine on the field. The team doctor is tricked out
in umpire's

regalia. He is whisking off home plate . . . which happens to be a human heart. The
base paths are

intestines. The bases are chunks of the unfortunate Herbie Satten's body. In the
penultimate panel

we see that the batter is standing in the box and that instead of a Louisville
Slugger he is swinging

one of Herbie's severed legs. The pitcher is holding a grotesquely mangled human
head and

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preparing to throw it. The head, from which one eyeball dangles on its stalk, looks
as though it's

already been hit over the fence for a couple of home runs, although as Davis has
drawn it ("Jolly

Jack Davis," as the fans of the day called him; he now sometimes does covers for TV
Guide), one

would not expect it to carry so far. It is, in the parlance of baseball players, "a
dead ball."

The Old Witch followed this helping of mayhem with her own conclusions, beginning
with the

immortal E. C. Chuckle: "Heh, heh! So that's my yelp-yarn for this issue, kiddies.

Herbie, the pitcher,

went to pieces that night and was taken out . . . of existence, that is . . . "

As you can see, both "The Monkey's Paw" and "Foul Play" are horror stories, but their mode of attack

and their ultimate effect are light-years apart. You may also have an idea of why the comic publishers

of America cleaned their own house in the early fifties . . . before the U.S. Senate decided to do it for

them.

So: terror on top, horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion.

My own philosophy

as a sometime writer of horror fiction is to recognize these distinctions because they are sometimes

useful, but to avoid any preference for one over the other on the grounds that one effect is somehow

better than another. The problem with definitions is that they have a way of turning into critical

tools-and this sort of criticism, which I would call criticism-by-rote, seems to me needlessly restricting

and even dangerous. I recognize terror as the finest emotion (used to almost quintessential effect in

Robert Wisnes film *The Haunting*, where, as in "The Monkey's Paw," we are never allowed to see what

is behind the door), and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try

to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud.

When I conceived of the vampire novel which became 'Salem's Lot, I decided I Ranted to try to use

the book partially as a form of literary homage (as Peter Straub has done in Ghost Story, working in

the tradition of such "classical" ghost story writers as Henry James, M. R. James, and Nathaniel

Hawthorne). So my novel bears an intentional similarity to Bram Stoker's Dracula, and after awhile it

began to seem to me what I was doing was playing an interesting-to me, at least-game of literary

racquet-ball: 'Salem's Lot itself was the ball and Dracula was the wall I kept hitting it against, watching

to see how and where it would bounce, so I could hit it again. As a matter of fact, it took some pretty

interesting bounces, and I ascribe this mostly to the fact that, while my ball existed in the twentieth

century, my wall was very much a product of the nineteenth. At the same time, because the vampire

story was so much a staple of the E.C. comics I grew up with, I decided that I would also try to bring

in that aspect of the horror story. *

*The scene in 'Salem's Lot which works best in the E.C. tradition-at least, as far as I'm concerned-is when the bus

driver, Charlie Rhodes (who is a typical E.C.-type rotter in the best Herbie Satten

tradition), awakes at midnight and hears

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someone blowing the horn of his bus. He discovers, after the bus doors have swung

shut forever behind him, that his bus

is loaded with children, as if for a school run . . . but they're all vampires.

Charlie begins to scream, and perhaps the

reader wonders why; after all, they only stopped by for a drink.

Heh, heh.

Some of the scenes from 'Salem's Lot which run parallel to scenes from Dracula are

the staking of

Susan Norton (corresponding to the staking of Lucy Westenra in Stoker's book), the

drinking of the

vampire's blood by the priest, Father Callahan (in Dracula it is Mina Murray Harker

who is forced to

take the Count's perverse communion as he croons those memorable, chilling lines,

"My bountiful

wine-press for a little while . . ."), the burning of Callahan's hand as he tries

to enter his church to

receive absolution (when, in Dracula, Van Helsing touches Mina's forehead with a

piece of the Host to

cleanse her of the Count's unclean touch, it flashes into fire, leaving a terrible

scar), and, of course,

the band of Fearless Vampire Hunters which forms in each book.

The scenes from Dracula which I chose to retool for my own book were the ones which

impressed

me the most deeply, the ones Stoker seemed to have written at fever pitch. There are others, but the

one "bounce" that never made it into the finished book was a play on Stoker's use of rats in Dracula.

In Stoker's novel, the Fearless Vampire Hunters-Van Helsing, Jonathan Harker, Dr. Seward, Lord

Godalming, and Quincey Morris-enter the basement of Carfax, the Count's English house. The

Count himself has long since split the scene, but he has left some of his traveling coffins (boxes full of

his native earth), and another nasty surprise. Very shortly after the F.V.H.s enter, the basement is

crawling with rats. According to the lore (and in his long novel, Stoker martials a formidable amount of

vampire lore), a vampire has the ability to command the lesser animals-cats, rats, weasels (and

possibly Republicans, ha-ha). It is Dracula who has sent these rats to give our heroes a hard time.

Lord Godalming is ready for this, however. He lets a couple of terriers out of a bag, and they make

short work of the Count's rats. I decided I would let Barlow-my version of Count Dracula-also use

the rats, and to that end I gave the town of Jerusalem's Lot an open dump, where there are lots of

rats. I played on the presence of the rats there several times in the first couple

of hundred pages of

the novel, and to this day I sometimes get letters asking if I just forgot about the

rats, or tried to use

them to create atmosphere, or what.

Actually, I used them to create a scene so revolting that my editor at Doubleday

(the same Bill

Thompson mentioned in the forenote to this volume) suggested strongly that I remove

it and

substitute something else. After some grousing, I complied with his wishes. In the

Doubleday/New

American Library editions of 'Salem's Lot, Jimmy Cody, a local doctor, and Mark

Petrie, the boy

accompanying him, discover that the king vampire-to use Van Helsing's pungent

term-is almost

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certainly denning in the basement of a local boarding house. Jimmy begins to go

downstairs, but the

stairs have been cut away and the floor beneath littered with knives pounded through

boards. Jimmy

Cody dies impaled upon these knives in a scene of what I would call "horror"-as

opposed to "terror"

or "revulsion," the scene is a middle-of-the-roader.

In the first draft manuscript, however, I had Jimmy go down the stairs and

discover-too late-that

Barlow had called all the rats from the dump to the cellar of Eva Miller's boarding house. There was a regular HoJo for rats down there, and Jimmy Cody became the main course. They attack Jimmy in their hundreds, and we are treated (if that is the word) to a picture of the good doctor struggling back up the stairs, covered with rats. They are down his shirt, crawling in his hair, biting his neck and arms.

When he opens his mouth to yell Mark a warning, one of them runs into his mouth and lodges there, squirming.

I was delighted with the scene as written because it gave me a chance to combine Dracula-lore and E.C.-lore into one. My editor felt that it was, to put it frankly, out to lunch, and I was eventually persuaded to see it his way. Perhaps he was even right*.

*Rats are nasty little buggers, aren't they? I wrote and published a rat story called "Graveyard Shift" in Cavalier magazine four years prior to 'Salem's Lot-it was, in fact, the third short story I ever published-and I was uneasy about the similarity between the rats under the old mill in "Graveyard Shift" and those in the basement of the boarding house in 'Salem's Lot. As writers near the end of a book, I suspect that they cope with weariness in all sorts of ways-and my response as I neared the end of 'Salem's Lot was to indulge in this bit of selfplagiarism. And so, even though I suspect

there's a disappointed rat-fan or two out there, I've got to say I believe Bill Thompson's judgment that the rats in 'Salem's Lot should simply fade from the scene was the right one.

I've tried here to delineate some of the differences between science fiction and horror, science fiction and fantasy, terror and horror, horror and revulsion, more by example than by definition. All of which is very well, but perhaps we ought to examine the emotion of horror a little more closely-not in terms of definition but in terms of effect. What does horror do? Why do people want to be horrified . . . why do they pay to be horrified? Why an Exorcist? A Jaws? An Alien?

But before we talk about why people crave the effect, maybe we ought to spend a little time thinking about components-and if we do not choose to define horror itself, we can at least examine the elements and perhaps draw some conclusions from them.

2

Horror movies and horror novels have always been popular, but every ten or twenty years they seem to enjoy a cycle of increased popularity and visibility. These periods almost always seem to coincide with periods of fairly serious economic and/or political strain, and the books and films seem

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to reflect those free-floating anxieties (for want of a better term) which accompany such serious but

not mortal dislocations. They have done less well in periods when the American people have been

faced with outright examples of horror in their own lives.

Horror went through a boom period in the 1930s, When people hardpressed by the Depression

weren't ponying up at the box office to see a hundred Busby Berkeley girls dancing to the tune of

"We're in the Money," they were perhaps releasing their anxieties in another way-by watching Boris

Karloff shamle across the moors in Frankenstein or Bela Lugosi creep through the dark with his

cape up over his mouth in Dracula. The '30s also marked the rise of the so-called "Shudder Pulps,"

which encompassed everything from Weird Tales to Black Mark.

We find few horror movies or novels of note in the 1940s, and the one great magazine of fantasy

which debuted in that decade, Unknown, did not survive for long. The great Universal Studios

monsters of the Depression days-Frankenstein's monster, the Wolf Man, the Mummy, and the

Count-were dying in that particularly messy and embarrassing way that the movies seem to reserve

for the terminally ill; instead of being retired with honors and decently interred

in the mouldy soil of
their European churchyards, Hollywood decided to play them for laughs, squeezing
every last quarter
and dime admission possible out of the poor old things before letting them go.
Hence, Abbott &
Costello met the monsters, as did the Bowery Boys, not to mention those lovable
eyeboinkers and
head-knockers, the Three Stooges. In the '40s, the monsters themselves became
stooges. Years
later, in another postwar period, Mel Brooks would give us his version of Abbott and
Costello Meet
Frankenstein, Young Frankenstein-starring Gene Wilder and Marty Feldman instead of
Bud Abbott
and Lou Costello.
The eclipse of horror in fiction that began in 1940 lasted for twenty-five years.
Oh, an occasional
novel such as Richard Matheson's *Shrinking Man* or William Sloane's *Edge of Running*
Water would
pop up, reminding us that the genre was still there (although even Matheson's grim
man-against-giant-spider tale, a horror story if there ever was one, was touted as
science fiction), but
the idea of a best-selling horror novel would have been laughed out of court along
Publisher's Row.
As with the movies, the golden age of weird fiction had passed in the '30s, when
Weird Tales was

at the peak of its influence and quality (not to mention its circulation),

publishing the fiction of Clark

Ashton Smith, the young Robert Block, Dr. David H. Keller, and, of course, the

twentieth-century

horror story's dark and baroque prince, H. P. Lovecraft. I will not offend those who

have followed

weird fiction over a span of fifty years by suggesting that horror disappeared in

the 1940s; indeed it

did not. Arkham House had then been founded by the late August Derleth, and Arkham

published

what I regard as its most important works in the period 1939-1950-works including

Lovecraft's The

Outrider and Beyond the Wall of Sleep, Henry S. Whitehead's Jumbee, The Opener of

the Way and

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Pleasant Dreams, by Robert Bloch . . . and Ray Bradbury's Dark Carnival, a marvelous

and terrifying

collection of a darker world just beyond the threshold of this one.

But Lovecraft was dead before Pearl Harbor; Bradbury would turn his hand more and

more often to

his own lyric blend of science fiction and fantasy (and it was only after he did so

that his work began

to be accepted by such mainstream magazines as Collier's and the Saturday Evening

Post) ; Robert

Bloch had begun to write his suspense stories, using what he had learned in his

first two decades as

a writer to create a powerful series of offbeat novels, which are only surpassed by the novels of

Cornell Woolrich.

During and after the war years, horror fiction was in decline. The age did not like it. It was a period

of rapid scientific development and rationalism-they grow very well in a war atmosphere, thanks and

it became a period which is now thought of by fans and writers alike as "the golden age of

science fiction." While *Weird Tales* plugged grimly along, holding its own but hardly reaping millions (it

would fold in the mid-fifties after a down-sizing from its original gaudy pulp size to a digest form failed

to effect a cure for its ailing circulation), the sf market boomed, spawning a dozen well-remembered

pulps and making names such as Heinlein, Asimov, Campbell, and del Rey, if not household words,

at least familiar and exciting to an ever-growing community of fans dedicated to the proposition of the

rocket ship, the space station, and the ever-popular death ray.

So horror languished in the dungeon until 1955 or so, rattling its chains once in a while but causing

no great stir. It was around that time that two men named Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson

stumbled downstairs and discovered a money machine rusting away unnoticed in that particular

dungeon. Originally film distributors, Arkoff and Nicholson decided that, since there was an acute

shortage of B-pictures in the early fifties, they would make their own.

Insiders predicted speedy economic ruin for the entrepreneurs. They were told they were setting to

sea in a lead sailboat; this was the age of TV. The insiders had seen the future and it belonged to

Dagmar and Richard Diamond, Private Detective. The consensus among those who cared at all (and

there weren't many) was that Arkoff and Nichols-on would lose their shirts very quickly.

But during the twenty-five years that the company they formed,

American-International Pictures,

has been around (it's now Arkoff alone; James Nicholson died several years ago), it has been the

only major American film company to show a consistent profit, year in and year out.

AIP has made a

great variety of films, but all of them have taken dead aim on the youth market; the company's

pictures include such dubious classics as Boxcar Bertha, Bloody Mama, Dragstrip Girl, The Trip,

Dillinger, and the immortal Beach Blanket Bingo. But their greatest success was with horror films.

What elements made these AIP films shlock classics? They were simple, shot in a

hurry, and so

amateurish that one can sometimes see the shadow of a boom mike in the shot or catch

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the gleam of

an air tank inside the monster suit of an underwater creature (as in The Attack o f

the Giant

Leeches). Arkoff himself recalls that they rarely began with a completed script or

even a coherent

screen treatment; often money was committed to projects on the basis of a title that

sounded

commercial, such as Terror from the Year 5000 or The Brain Eaters, something that

would make an

eye-catching poster.

Whatever the elements were, they worked.

3

Well, let all that go for the moment. Let's talk monsters.

Exactly what is a monster?

Begin by assuming that the tale of horror, no matter how primitive, is allegorical

by its very nature;

that it is symbolic. Assume that it is talking to us, like a patient on a

psychoanalyst's couch, about one

thing while it means another. I am not saying that horror is consciously allegorical

or symbolic; that is

to suggest an artfulness that few writers of horror fiction or directors of horror

films aspire to. There

has recently been a retrospective of AIP movies in New York (1979), and the idea of a retrospective

suggests art, but at most they are trash art. The pictures have great nostalgia value, but those

searching for culture may look elsewhere. To suggest that Roger Corman was unconsciously creating

art while on a twelve-day shooting schedule and a budget of \$80,000 is to suggest the absurd.

The element of allegory is there only because it is built-in, a given, impossible to escape. Horror

appeals to us because it says, in a symbolic way, things we would be afraid to say right out straight,

with the bark still on; it offers us a chance to exercise (that's right; not exorcise but exercise) emotions

which society demands we keep closely in hand. The horror film is an invitation to indulge in deviant,

antisocial behavior by proxy-to commit gratuitous acts of violence, indulge our puerile dreams of

power, to give in to our most craven fears. Perhaps more than anything else, the horror story or

horror movie says it's okay to join the mob, to become the total tribal being, to destroy the outsider. It

has never been done better or more literally than in Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," where

the entire concept of the outsider is symbolic, created by nothing more than a black

circle colored on

a slip of paper. But there is no symbolism in the rain of stones which ends the

story; the victim's own

child pitches in as the mother dies, screaming "It's not fair! It's not fair!"

Nor is it an accident that the horror story ends so often with an O. Henry twist

that leads straight

down a mine shaft. When we turn to the creepy movie or the crawly book, we are not

wearing our

"Everything works out for the best" hats. We're waiting to be told what we so often

suspect-that

everything is turning to shit. In most cases the horror story provides ample proof

that such is indeed

the case, and I don't believe, when Katharine Ross falls prey to the Stepford Men's

Association at the

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conclusion of The Stepford Wives or when the heroic black man is shot dead by the

numbnuts

sheriff's posse at the end of Night of the Living Dead, that anyone is really

surprised. It is, as they say,

a part of the game.

And monstrosity? What about that part of the game? What sort of handle can we get on

that? If we

don't define, can we at least exemplify? Here is a fairly explosive package, my

friends.

What about the freaks in the circus? The carny aberrations observed by the light of
naked
hundred-watt bulbs? What about Cheng and Eng, the famous Siamese twins? A majority
of people
considered them monstrous in their day, and an even greater number no doubt
considered the fact
that each had his own married life even more monstrous. America's most mordant-and
sometimes
funniest-cartoonist, a fellow named Rodrigues, has rung the changes on the
Siamese-twin theme in
his Aesop Brothers strip in the National Lampoon, where we have our noses rubbed in
almost every
possible bizarre exigency of life among the mortally attached: the sex lives of,
the bathroom
functions of, the love lives, the sicknesses. Rodrigues provides everything you ever
wondered about
in regard to Siamese twins . . . and fulfills your darkest surmises. To say that all
of this is in poor taste
may be true, but it's still a futile and impotent criticism-the old National
Enquirer used to run pictures
of car-wreck victims in pieces and dogs munching happily away at severed human
heads, but it did a
land-office business in grue before lapsing back into a quieter current of the
American mainstream. *

*And yet there is life in the old Enquirer yet. I buy it if there's a juicy UFO
story or something about Bigfoot, but mostly I

only scan it rapidly while in a slow supermarket checkout lane, looking for such
endearing lapses of taste as the notorious
autopsy photo of Lee Harvey Oswald or their photo of Elvis Presley in his coffin.
Still, it is a far cry froth the old mom
COOKS PET DOG AND FEEDS IT TO KIDS days.
What about the other carny freaks? Are they classifiable as monstrosities? Dwarves?
Midgets?
The bearded lady? The fat lady? The human skeleton? At one time or another most of
us have been
there, standing on the beaten, sawdust-strewn dirt with a chili-dog or a paper of
sweet cotton candy in
one hand while the barker hucksters us, usually with one sample of these human
offshoots standing
nearby as a specimen-the fat lady in her pink little girl's tutu, the tattooed man
with the tail of a
dragon curled around his burly neck like a fabulous hangman's noose, or the man who
eats nails and
scrap metal and light bulbs. Perhaps not so many of us have surrendered to the urge
to cough up the
two bits or four bits or six bits to go inside and see them, plus such alltime
favorites as The
Two-Headed Cow or The Baby in a Bottle (I have been writing horror stories since I
was eight, but
have never yet attended a freak show), but most of us have surely felt the impulse.
And at some

carnivals, the most terrible freak of all is kept out back, kept in darkness like
some damned thing from

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Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell, kept there because his performance was forbidden by
law as long ago as

1910 kept in a pit and dressed in a rag. This is the geek, and for an extra buck or
two you could stand

at the edge of his pit and watch him bite off the head of a live chicken and then
swallow it even as the

decapitated bird fluttered in his hands.

There is something so attractive about freaks, yet something so forbidden and
appalling, that the

one serious effort to use them as the mainspring of a horror picture resulted in the
film's quick

shelving. The picture was Freaks, a Tod Browning film made in 1932 for MGM.

Freaks is the story of Cleopatra, the beautiful acrobat who marries a midget. In the
best E.C.

tradition (an E.C. that was almost twenty years unborn in 1932), she has a heart as
black as midnight

in a coal mine. It's not the midget she's interested in, it's his money. Like the
mateeating human

trapdoor spiders of those comic-book stories yet to come, Cleo soon takes up with
another man; in

this case it's Hercules, the show's strongman. Like Cleopatra herself, Hercules is
at least nominally

okay, although it is with the freaks that our sympathies lie. These two heels begin a systematic poisoning program on Cleo's tiny husband. The other freaks discover what is going on and take an almost unspeakable revenge on the pair. Hercules is killed (there is a rumor that, as Browning originally conceived the film, the strongman was to be castrated) and the beautiful Cleopatra is turned into a bird-woman, feathered and legless. Browning made the mistake of using real freaks in his film. We may only feel really comfortable with horror as long as we can see the zipper running up the monster's hack, when we understand that we are not playing for keepsies. The climax of Freaks, as the Living Torso and the Armless Wonder and the Hilton Sisters-Siamese twins-among others, slither and flop through the mud after the screaming Cleopatra, was simply too much. Even some of MGM's tame exhibitors flatly refused to show it, and Carlos Clarens reports in his Illustrated History of the Horror Pima (Capricorn Books: 1968) that at its one preview in San Diego "a woman ran screaming up the aisle." The film was exhibited-after a fashion-in a version so radically cut that one film critic complained that he had no idea what he was watching. Clarens further reports that

the film was

banned for thirty years in the U.K., the country that has brought us, among other things, Johnny

Rotten, Sid Vicious, the Snivelling Shits, and the charming custom of "Paki-bashing."

Freaks is now sometimes exhibited on PTV stations and may at this writing have finally become

available on videocassettes. But to this day it remains a source of heated discussion, comment, and

conjecture among horror fans-and although many have heard of it, surprisingly few have actually seen it.

4

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Leaving freaks entirely out of it for the moment, what else do we consider horrible enough to label

with what surely must be the world's oldest perjorative? Well, there were all those bizarre Dick Tracy

villains, perhaps best epitomized by Flyface, and there was the archenemy of Don Window, The

Scorpion, whose face was so horrible that he had to keep it constantly covered (although he would

sometimes unveil it to minions who had failed him in some way-said minions would immediately

drop dead of heart attacks, literally scared to death). So far as I know, the

horrible secret of The

Scorpion's physiognomy was never uncovered (pardon the pun, heh-heh) , but the

intrepid

Commander Winslow did once succeed in unmasking The Scorpion's daughter, who had the

slack,

dead face of a corpse. This information was delivered to the breathless reader in

italics-the slack,

dead face of a corpse!-for added emphasis.

Perhaps the "new generation" of comic monsters is best epitomized by those created

by Stan Lee's

Marvel Comics, where for every superhero such as Spiderman or Captain America, there

seem to be

a dozen freakish aberrations: Dr. Octopus (known to children all over the

comicreading world as Doc

Ock), whose arms have been replaced by what appear to be a waving forest of

homicidal

vacuum-cleaner attachments; The Sandman, who is a sort of walking sand dune; The

Vulture;

Stegron; The Lizard; and most ominous of all, Dr. Doom, who has been so badly maimed

in his

Twisted Pursuit of Forbidden Science that he is now a great, clanking cyborg who

wears a green

cape, peers through eyeholes like the archers' slits in a medieval castle, and who

appears to be

literally sweating rivets. Superheroes with elements of monstrosity in their makeup

seem less

enduring. My own favorite, Plastic Man (always accompanied by his wonderfully screwball sidekick,

Woozy Winks), just never made it. Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four is a Plastic Man lookalike,

and his cohort Ben Grimm (aka The Thing) looks like a hardened lava flow, but they are among the

few exceptions to the rule.

So far, we've talked about carny freaks and the caricatures we sometimes find in the funnies, but

let's come a trifle closer to home. You might ask yourself what you consider monstrous or horrible in

daily life-you're exempted from this if you're a doctor or a nurse; these people see all the aberrations

they can handle, and much the same can be said for policemen and bartenders.

But as for the rest of us?

Take fat. How fat does a person have to be before he or she passes over the line and into a

perversion of the human form severe enough to be called monstrosity? Surely it is not the woman

who shops Lane Bryant or the fellow who buys his suits in that section of the menswear store

reserved for the "husky build"-or is it? Has the obese person reached the point of monstrosity when

he or she can no longer go to the movies or to a concert because his/her buttocks will no longer fit

between the fixed armrests of a single seat?

You will understand that I am not talking about how fat is too fat here, either in

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the medical or

aesthetic sense, nor anyone's "right to be fat"; I am not talking about the lady you

glimpsed crossing a

country road to get her mail on a summer day, her gigantic butt encased in black

slacks, cheeks

whacking and wobbling together, belly hanging out of an untucked white blouse like

slack dough; I am

talking of a point where simple overweight has passed through the outermost

checkpoints of

normality and has become something that, regardless of morality or immorality,

attracts the helpless

eye and overwhelms it. I am speculating on your reaction-and my own-to those human

beings so

enormous that we wonder about how they may perform acts that we mostly take for

granted: going

through a door, sitting down in a car, calling home from a telephone booth, bending

over to tie our

shoes, taking a shower.

You may say to me, Steve, you're just talking carny again-the fat lady in her pink

little girl's tutu;

those humongous twins who have been immortalized in the Guinness Book of World

Records riding

away from the camera that clicked the picture on identical tiny motor scooters,
their buttocks sticking

out to either side like a dream of gravity in suspension. But in point of fact, I am
not talking about such

people, who, after all, exist in their own world where a different scale is applied
to questions of

normality; how freakish can you feel, even at five hundred pounds, in the company of
dwarves, Living

Torsos, and Siamese twins? Normality is a sociological concept. There's an old joke
about two

African leaders getting together with JFK for a state meeting and then going home on
a plane

together. One of them marvels, "Kennedy What a funny name!" In the same vein, there
is the Twilight

Zone episode, "Eye of the Beholder," about the horribly ugly woman whose plastic
surgery has failed

for the umpteenth time . . . and we only find out at the end of the program that she
exists in a future

where most people look like grotesquely humanoid pigs. The "ugly" woman is, by our
standards, at

least, extraordinarily beautiful.

I am talking about the fat man or woman in our society-the four-hundred-pound
businessman, for

example-who routinely buys two seats in tourist when he flies and kicks up the
armrest between

them. I am talking about the woman who cooks herself four hamburgers for lunch, eats them between eight slices of bread, has a quart of potato salad on the side topped with sour cream, and follows this repast with half a gallon of Breyer's ice cream spread over the top of a Table Talk pie like frosting.

On a business trip to New York in 1976, I observed a very fat man who had become trapped in a revolving door at the Doubleday Book Shop on Fifth Avenue. Gigantic and sweating in a blue pinstriped suit, he seemed to have been poured into his wedge of the door. The book shop's security guard was joined by a city policeman, and the two of them pushed and grunted until the door began to move again, jerk by jerk. At last it moved enough to let the gentleman out. I wondered then and wonder now if the crowd

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danse macabre Stephen King that gathered to watch this salvage operation was much different from those crowds that form when the carny barker begins his spiel . . . or when, in the original Universal film, Frankenstein's monster arose from its laboratory slab and walked.

Are fat people monstrous? How about somebody with a harelip or a large facial

birthmark? You

couldn't get into any self-respecting carny in the country with one of those-too common, so sorry.

What about somebody with six fingers on one or both hands, or a total of six toes on both feet? There

are a lot of those guys around, too. Or, getting down even further toward Your Block, U.S.A., what

about someone with a really bad case of acne?

Of course ordinary pimples are no big deal; even the prettiest cheerleader on the squad is apt to

get one on her forehead or near one corner of her kissable mouth once in a while, but ordinary fat is

no big deal, either-I'm talking about the case of acne that has run absolutely apeshit, spreading like

something out of a Japanese horror movie, pimples on pimples, and most of them red and

suppurating.

Like the chest-burster in Alien, it's enough to put you off your popcorn . . .

except this is real.

Perhaps I've not touched your idea of monstrosity in real life even yet, and perhaps

I won't, but for

just a moment consider such an ordinary thing as left-handedness. Of course, the discrimination

against lefthanded people is obvious from the start. If you've attended a college or high school with

the more modern desks, you know that most of them are built for inhabitants of an

exclusively

right-handed world. Most educational facilities will order a few left-hand desks as

a token gesture, but

that's all. And during testing or composition situations, lefties are usually

segregated on one side of

the lecture hall so they will not jog the elbows of their more normal counterparts.

But it goes deeper than discrimination. The roots of discrimination spread wide, but

the roots of

monstrosity spread both wide and deep. Left-handed baseball players are all

considered screwballs,

whether they are or not.* The French for left, bastardized from the Latin, is la

sinistre,

*Take for instance Bill Lee, now of the Montreal Expos, late of the Boston Red Sox.

Lee was dubbed "The Spaceman"

by his colleagues and is remembered fondly by Boston fans for exhorting those who

attended a rally following the Sox's

pennant win in 1976 to pick up their trash when they left. Perhaps the strongest

proof of his "leftiness" came when he

referred to Red Sox manager Don Zimmer as "the designated gerbil." Lee moved to

Montreal soon after.

from which comes our word sinister. According to the old superstition, your right

side belongs to God,

your left side to that other fellow. Southpaws have always been suspect. My mother

was a leftie, and

as a schoolgirl, so she told my brother and me, the teacher would rap her left hand

smartly with a

ruler to make her change her pen to her right hand. When the teacher left she would switch the pen

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back again, of course, because with her right hand she could make only large, childish scrawls-the

fate of most of us when we try to write with what New Englanders call "the dumb hand." A few of us,

such as Branwell Brontë (the gifted brother of Charlotte and Emily), can write clearly and well with

either hand. Branwell Brontë was in fact so ambidextrous that he could write two different letters to

two different people at the same time. We might reasonably wonder if such an ability qualifies as

monstrosity . . . or genius.

In fact, almost every physical and mental human aberration has been at some point in history, or is

now, considered monstrous-a complete list would include widows' peaks (once considered a

reliable sign that a man was a sorcerer), moles on the female body (supposed to be witches' teats),

and extreme schizophrenia, which on occasion has caused the afflicted to be canonized by one

church or another.

Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a

three-piece suit

who resides within all of us. We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it

is a reaffirmation

of the order we all crave as human beings . . . and let me further suggest that it

is not the physical or

mental aberration in itself which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order which

these aberrations

seem to imply.

The late John Wyndham, perhaps the best writer of science fiction that England has

ever

produced, summarized the idea in his novel *The Chrysalids* (published as *Rebirth in*

America). It is a

story that considers the ideas of mutation and deviation more brilliantly than any

other novel written in

English since World War II, I think. A series of plaques in the home of the novel's

young protagonist

offer stern counsel: ONLY THE IMAGE OF GOD IS MAN; KEEP PURE THE STOCK OF THE LORD;

IN PURITY OUR SALVATION; BLESSED IS THE NORM; and most telling of all: WATCH THOU

FOR THE MUTANT! After all, when we discuss monstrosity, we are expressing our faith

and belief in

the norm and watching for the mutant. The writer of horror fiction is neither more

nor less than an

agent of the status quo.

Having said all that, let's now return to the American-International pictures of the 1950s. In a little while we'll tally about the allegorical qualities of these films (you there in the back row, stop laughing or leave the room), but for now let's stick to the idea of monstrosity . . . and if we touch allegory at all, we'll touch it only lightly, by suggesting some of the things films were not. Although they came along at the same time rock and roll broke the race barrier, and although they appealed to the same fledgling hoppers, it's interesting to notice the sort of things that are altogether absent . . . at least in terms of "real" monstrosity.

We've noted already that the AIP pictures, and those of the other independent film companies that began to imitate AIP, gave the movie industry a much-needed shot in the arm during the ho-hum

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danse macabre Stephen King fifties. They gave millions of young viewers something they couldn't get at home on TV, and it gave them a place where they could go and make out in relative comfort. And it was the "indies," as Variety calls them, that gave a whole generation of war babies an insatiable Jones for the movies, and perhaps prepared the way for the success of such disparate movies as Easy Rider, Jaws, Rocky, The

Godfather, and The Exorcist.

But where are the monsters?

Oh, we've got fake ones by the score: saucer-men, giant leeches, werewolves, mole people (in a

Universal picture), and dozens more. But what AIP didn't show as they tested these interesting new

waters was anything that smacked of real horror . . . at least as those war babies understood the term

emotionally. That is an important qualification, and I hope you'll come to agree with me that it

warrants its italics.

These were-we were-children who knew about the psychic distress that came with The Bomb,

but who had never known any real physical want or deprivation. None of the kids who went to these

movies were starving or dying of internal parasites. A few had lost fathers or uncles in the war. Not many.

And in the movies themselves, there were no fat kids; no kids with warts or tics; no kids with

pimples; no kids picking their noses and then wiping it on the sun visors of their hot rods; no kids with

sexual problems; no kids with any visible physical deformity (not even such a minor one as vision that

had been corrected by glasses-all the kids in the AIP horror and beach pictures had

20/20 vision).

There might be an endearingly wacky teenager on view-of the sort often played by Nick Adams-a

kid who was a bit shorter or did daring, kooky things such as wearing his hat backwards like a

baseball catcher (and who had a name like Weirdo or Scooter or Crazy), but that was as far as it ever went.

The setting for most of these films was small-town America, the scene the audience could best

identify with . . . but all of these Our Towns looked eerily as if a eugenics squad had gone by the day

before production actually began, removing everyone with a lisp, birthmark, limp, or potbellyeveryone,

in short, who did not look like Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Robert Young, or Jane

Wyatt. Of course Elisha Cook, Jr., who appeared in a great many of these films, has always looked a

bit weird, but he always got killed in the first reel, so I feel he really doesn't count.

Although both rock and roll and the new youth movies (everything from I Was a Teenage

Werewolf to Rebel Without a Cause) burst upon an older generation, just beginning to relax enough

to translate "their war" into myth, with all the unpleasant surprise of a mugger leaping out of a privet

hedge, both the music and the movies were only preshocks of a genuine youthquake to come. Little

Richard was certainly unsettling, and Michael Landon—who didn't even have enough school spirit to at

least take off his high school jacket before turning into a man-wolf—was also

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unsettling, but it would

still be miles and years to the Fish Cheer at Woodstock and Old Leatherface doing impromptu

surgery with his McCulloch in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,

It was a decade when every parent trembled at the spectre of juvenile delinquency:

the mythic

teenaged hood leaning in the doorway of the candy store there in Our Town, his hair bejeweled with

Vitalis or Brylcreem, a pack of Luckies tucked under the epaulet of his motorcycle jacket, a fresh zit at

one corner of his mouth and a brand-new switchblade in his back pocket, waiting for a kid to beat up,

a parent to harass and embarrass, a girl to assault, or possibly a dog to rape and then kill . . . or

maybe vice-versa. It is a once-dread image which has now undergone its own myth-making,

homogenizing process; pop in James Dean and/or Vic Morrow here, wait twenty years, and

heypresto! out pops Arthur Fonzarelli. But during the period, the newspapers and
magazines of the
popular press saw young jd's everywhere, just as these same organs of the fourth
estate had seen
Commies everywhere a few years before. Their chain-decked engineer boots and pegged
Levis could
be seen or imagined on the streets of Oakdale and Pineview and Centerville; in
Mundamian, Iowa,
and in Lewiston, Maine. The shadow of the dreaded jd stretched long. Marlon Brando
had been first
to give this empty-headed nihilist a voice, in a picture called The Wild One. "What
are you rebelling
against?" the pretty girl asks him. Answers Marlon: "What have you got?"
To some fellow in Asher Heights, North Carolina, who had somehow survived forty-one
missions
over Germany in the belly of a bomber and who now only wanted to sell a lot of
Buicks with
Power-Flite transmissions, that sounded like very bad news indeed; here was a fellow
for whom the
Jaycees held no charms.
But as there turned out to be fewer Communists and fifth columnists than was at
first suspected,
the Shadow of the Dread JD also proved to be rather overrated. In the last analysis,
the war babies
wanted what their parents wanted. They wanted driver's licences; jobs in the cities
and homes in the

suburbs; wives and husbands; insurance; underarm protection; kids; time payments

which they would

meet; clean streets; clear consciences. They wanted to be good. Years and miles

between Senior

Glee Club and the SLA; years and miles between Our Town and the Mekong Delta; and

the only

known fuzz-tone guitar track in existence was a technical mistake on a Marty Robbins

country and

western record. They adhered happily to school dress codes. Long sideburns were

laughed at in

most quarters, and a guy wearing stacked heels or bikini briefs would have been

hounded

unmercifully as a faggot. Eddie Cochran could sing about "those crazy pink pegged

slacks" and kids

would buy the records . . . , but not the pants themselves. For the war babies, the

norm was blessed.

They wanted to be good. They watched for the mutant.

Only one aberration per picture was allowed in the early youthcult horror films of

the fifties, one

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mutation. It was the parents who would never believe. It was the kids-who wanted to

be good-who

stood watch (most often from those lonely bluffs which overlook Our Town from the

ends of lovers'

lanes); it was the kids who stamped the mutant out, once more making the world safe for country club dances and Hamilton Beach blenders.

Horrors in the fifties, for the war babies, were mostly-except maybe for the psychic strain of

waiting for The Bomb to fall-mundane horrors. And perhaps a conception of real horror is impossible

for people whose bellies are full. The horrors the war babies felt were scale-model horrors, and in that

light the movies that really caused AIP to take off, I Was a Teenage Werewolf and I Was a Teenage

Frankenstein, become mildly interesting.

In Werewolf, Michael Landon plays an attractive but moody high school student with a quick

temper. He's basically a good kid, but he's involved in one fight after another (

like David Banner, the

Hulk's alter-ego on TV, the Landon character actually provokes none of these fights)

until it looks as

though he will be suspended from school. He goes to see a psychiatrist (Whit

Bissell, who also plays

the mad descendant of Victor Frankenstein in Teenage Frankenstein) who turns out to be totally evil.

Seeing Landon as a throwback to an earlier stage of human development-like back to the Alley Oop

stage-Bissell uses hypnosis to regress Landon totally, in effect deliberately making the problem

worse instead of trying to cure it. This plot twist seems cribbed from the then-current and fabulously successful Search for Bridey Murphy, the story (purportedly factual but later declared a hoax) of a woman who, under hypnosis, revealed memories of a previous life. Bissell's experiments succeed beyond his wildest dreams-or worst nightmares- and Landon becomes a ravening werewolf. For a 1957 high school or junior high school kid watching the transformation for the first time, this was baaad shit. Landon becomes the fascinating embodiment of everything you're not supposed to do if you want to be good . . . if you want to get along in school, join the National Honor Society, get your letter, and be accepted by a good college where you can join a frat and drink beer like your old man did. Landon grows hair all over his face, produces long fangs, and begins to drool a substance that looks suspiciously like Burma-Shave. He peeks at a girl doing exercises on the balance beam all by herself in the gymnasium, and one imagines him smelling like a randy polecat who just rolled in a nice fresh pile of coyote shit. No button-down Ivy League shirt with the fruit loop on the back here; here's a fellow who doesn't give a fart in a high wind for the Scholastic

Aptitude Tests. He has gone absolutely, not apeshit, but wolfshit.

Undoubtedly part of the reason for the movie's meteoric takeoff at the box office

had to do with the

liberating, vicarious feelings the movie allowed these war babies who wanted to be

good. When

Landon attacks the pretty gymnast in the leotard, he is making a social statement on

behalf of those

watching. But those watching also react in horror, because on the psychological

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level, the picture is a

series of object lessons on how to get along-everything from "shave before you go to

school" to

"never exercise in a deserted gym."

After all, there are beasts everywhere.

6

If I Was a Teenage Werewolf is, psychologically, that old dream of having your pants

fall down

when you stand up during homeroom period to salute the flag, taken to its most

nightmarish

extreme-the ultimate hirsute outsider menacing the peer groups at Our Town High-then

I Was a

Teenage Frankenstein is a sick parable of total glandular breakdown. It is a movie

for every

fifteen-year-old who ever stood in front of her or his mirror in the morning looking

nervously at the

fresh pimple that surfaced in the night and realizing glumly that even StriDex Medicated Pads weren't going to solve the whole problem no matter what Dick Clark said.

I keep coming back to pimples, you may say. You are right. In many ways I see the horror films of the late fifties and early sixties-up until Psycho, let us say-as paeans to the congested pore. I've suggested that it may be impossible for a people whose bellies are full to feel real horror. Similarly, Americans have had to severely limit their conceptions of physical deformity-and that is why the pimple has played such an important part in the developing psyche of the American teenager.

Of course, there's probably a guy out there, a guy born with a congenital birth defect, who's muttering to himself: don't talk to me about deformity, you asshole . . . and it is certainly true that there are Americans with club feet, Americans without noses, amputee Americans, blind Americans (I've always wondered if the blind of America felt discriminated against by that McDonald's jingle that goes, "Keep your eyes on your fries . . ."). Beside such cataclysmic physical fuck-ups of God, man, and nature, a few pimples look about as serious as a hangnail. But I should also point out that in America,

cataclysmic physical fuckups are (so far, at least) the exception rather than the rule. Walk down any ordinary street in America and count the serious physical defects you see. If you can walk three miles and come up with more than half a dozen, you're beating the average by a good country mile. Look for people under forty whose teeth have rotted right down to the gum line, children with the bloated bellies of oncoming starvation, folks with smallpox scars, and you will look in vain. You'll not find folks in the A & P with running sores on their faces or untreated ulcers on their arms and legs; if you set up a Head Inspection Station at the corner of Broad and Main, you could check a hundred heads and come up with only four or five really lively colonies of head lice. Incidence of these and other ailments rise in white rural areas and in the inner cities, but in the towns and suburbs of America, most people are looking good. The proliferation of self-help courses, the growing cult of personal development (

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"I'm going to be more assertive, if that's all right with you," as Erma Bombeck says), and the

increasingly widespread hobby of navel-contemplation are all signs that, for the time being, great

numbers of Americans have taken care of the nitty-gritty realities of life as it is
for most of the
world-the survival trip.

I can't imagine anyone with a severe nutritional deficiency caring much about I'm
OK-You're OK,

or anyone trying to scratch out a subsistence-level existence for himself, his wife,
and his eight kids

giving much of a toot about Werner Erhard's est course or Rolfing. Such things are
for rich folks.

Recently Joan Didion wrote a book about her own odyssey through the sixties, The
White Album. For

rich folks, I suppose it's a pretty interesting book: the story of a wealthy white
woman who could afford

to have her nervous breakdown in Hawaii the seventies equivalent of worrying over
pimples.

When the horizons of human experience shrink to HO scale, perspective changes. For
the war

babies, secure (except for The Bomb) in a world of six-month checkups, penicillin,
and eternal

orthodontics, the pimple became the primary physical deformity with which you were
seen on the

street or in the halls of your school; most of the other deformities had been taken
care of. And say,

having mentioned orthodontics, I'll add that many kids who had to wear braces during
dose years of

heavy, almost suffocating peer pressure saw them as a kind of deformity-every now and then you would hear the cry of "Hey, metalmouth!" in the halls. But most people saw them only as a form of treatment, no more remarkable than a girl with her arm in a sling or a football player wearing an Ace bandage on his knee.

But for the pimple there was no cure.

And here comes *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*. In this film, Whit Bissell assembles the creature, played by Gary Conway, from the bodies of dead hot-rodders. The leftover pieces are fed to the alligators under the house-of course we have an idea early on that Bissell himself will end up being munched by the gators, and we are not disappointed. Bissell is a total fiend in this movie, reaching existential heights of villainy: "He's crying, even the tear ducts work! . . .

Answer me, you have a civil tongue in your head. I know, I sewed it there." * But it is

*Quoted in *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film*, by Carlos Clarens (New York: Capricorn Books, 1967).

the unfortunate Conway who catches the eye and mainsprings the film. Like the villainy of Bissell, the physical deformity of Conway is so awful it becomes almost absurd . . . and he looks like nothing so much as a high school kid whose acne has run totally wild. His face is a lumpy

bas-relief map of

mountainous terrain from which one shattered eye bugs madly.

And yet . . . and yet . . . somehow this shambling creature still manages to dig

rock and roll, so he

can't be all bad, can he? We have met the monster, and, as Peter Straub points out

in *Ghost Story*,

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he is us.

We'll have more to say about monstrosity as we go along, and hopefully something of

a more

profound nature than is contained in the ore we can mine from *I Was a Teenage*

Werewolf and *I Was*

a *Teenage Frankenstein*, but I think it's important first to establish the fact that,

even on their simplest

level, these *Tales of the Hook* do a number of things without even trying to.

Allegory and catharsis are

both provided, but only because the creator of horror fiction is above all else an

agent of the norm.

This is true of horror's more physical side, and we'll find it's also true of works

which are more

consciously artistic, although when we turn our discussion to the mythic qualities

of horror and terror,

we may find some rather more disturbing and puzzling associations. But to reach that

point, we need

to turn our discussion away from film, at least for awhile, and to three novels which form most of the base on which the modern horror genre stands.

CHAPTER III

Tales of the Tarot

ONE OF THE most common themes in fantastic literature is that of immortality. "The thing that would not die" has been a staple of the field from Beowulf to Poe's tales of M. Valdemar and of the telltale heart, to the works of Lovecraft (such as "Cool Air"), Blatty, and even, God save us, John Saul.

The three novels I want to discuss in this chapter seem to have actually achieved that immortality, and I believe it's impossible to discuss horror in the years 1950-1980 with any real fullness of understanding unless we begin with these three books. All three live a kind of half-life outside the bright circle of English literature's acknowledged "classics," and perhaps with good reason. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was written at white heat by Robert Louis Stevenson in three days. It so horrified his wife that Stevenson burned the manuscript in his fireplace . . . and then wrote it again from scratch in another three days. Dracula is a frankly palpitating melodrama couched in the frame of the epistolary novel-a convention that

had

been breathing its last gasps twenty years before when Wilkie Collins was writing

the last of

his great mystery/suspense novels. Frankenstein, the most notorious of the three,

was penned

by a nineteen-year-old girl, and although it is the best written of the three, it is

the least read,

and its author would never again write so quickly, so well, so successfully . . . or

so

audaciously.

In the most unkind of critical lights, all three can be seen as no more than popular

novels of

their day, with little to distinguish them from novels roughly similar-The Monk, by

M. G. Lewis,

for instance, or Collins's Armadale- books largely forgotten except by teachers of

Gothic

fiction who occasionally pass them on to students, who approach them warily . . .

and then

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gulp them down.

But these three are something special. They stand at the foundation of a huge

skyscraper of

books and films-those twentieth-century gothics

which have become known as "the modern horror story." More than that, at the center

of each

stands (or slouches) a monster that has come to join and enlarge what Burt Hatlen

calls "the

myth-pool"-that body of fictive literature in which all of us, even the nonreaders

and those

who do not go to the films, have communally bathed. Like an almost perfect Tarot

hand

representing our lush concepts of evil, they can be neatly laid out: the Vampire,

the

Werewolf, and the Thing Without a Name.

One great novel of supernatural terror, Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, has

been

excluded from this Tarot hand, although it would complete the grouping by supplying

the

best-known mythic figure of the supernatural, that of the Ghost. I have excluded it

for two

reasons: first, because *The Turn of the Screw*, with its elegant drawing-room prose

and its

tightly woven psychological logic, has had very little influence on the mainstream

of the

American masscult. We would do better discussing Casper the Friendly Ghost in terms

of the

archetype. Secondly, the Ghost is an archetype (unlike those represented by

Frankenstein's

monster, Count Dracula, or Edward Hyde) which spreads across too broad an area to be

limited to a single novel, no matter how great. The archetype of the Ghost is, after

all, the

Mississippi of supernatural fiction, and although we will discuss it when the time comes, we'll

not limit its summing-up to a single book.

All of these books (including *The Turn of the Screw*) have certain things in common, and all

of them deal with the very basis of the horror story: secrets best left untold and things best left

unsaid. And yet Stevenson, Shelley, and Stoker (James, too) all promise to tell us the secret.

They do so with varying degrees of effect and success . . . and none of them can be said to

have really failed. Maybe that's what's kept the novels alive and vital. At any rate, there they

stand, and it seems to me impossible to write a book of this sort without doing something with

them. It's a matter of roots. It may not do you any good to know that your grandfather liked to

sit on the stoop of his building with his sleeves rolled up and smoke a pipe after supper, but it

may help to know that he emigrated from Poland in 1888, that he came to New York and helped to build the subway system. If it does nothing else, it may give you a new perspective

on your own morning subway ride. In the same way, it is hard to fully understand Christopher

Lee as Dracula without talking about that red-headed Irishman Abraham Stoker.

So . . . a few roots.

2

Frankenstein has probably been the subject of more films than any other literary work in

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history, including the Bible. The pictures include Frankenstein, The Bride of Frankenstein,

Frankenstein Meets the WolfMan, The Revenge of Frankenstein, Blackenstein, and Frankenstein 1980, to name just a handful. In light of this, summary would seem almost

unnecessary, but as previously pointed out, Frankenstein is not much read. Millions of

Americans know the name (not as many as know the name of Ronald McDonald, granted; now

there is a real culture hero), but most of them don't realize that Frankenstein is the name of the

monster's creator, not the monster itself, a fact which enhances the idea that the book has

become a part of Hatlen's American myth-pool rather than detracting from it. It's like pointing

out that Billy the Kid was in reality a tenderfoot from New York who wore a derby hat, had

syphilis, and probably back-shot most of his victims. People are interested in such facts, but

understand intuitively that they aren't what's really important now . . . if indeed they ever were.

One of the things that makes art a force to be reckoned with even by those who don't care for it is the regularity with which myth swallows truth . . . and without so much as a burp of indigestion.

Mary Shelley's novel is a rather slow and talky melodrama, its theme drawn in large, careful, and rather crude strokes. It is developed the way a bright but naive debate student might

develop his line of argument. Unlike the films based upon it, there are few scenes of violence,

and unlike the inarticulate monster of the Universal days ("the Karloff films," as Forry

Ackerman so charmingly calls them), Shelley's creature speaks with the orotund, balanced

phrases of peer in the House of Lords or William F. Buckley disputing politely with Dick Cavett

on a TV talk show. He is a cerebral creature, the direct opposite of Karloff's physically

overbearing monster with the shovel forelead and the sunken, stupidly crafty eyes; and in all

the book's pages there is nothing as chilling as Karloff's line in *The Bride of Frankenstein*,

spoken in that dull, dead, and dragging tenor: "Yes . . . dead . . . I love . . .
dead."

Ms. Shelley's novel is subtitled "The Modern Prometheus," and the Prometheus in
question

is Victor Frankenstein. He leaves hearth and home to go to university in Ingolstadt
(and

already we can hear the whirr of the author's grindstone as she prepares to sharpen
one of the

horror genre's most famous axes: There Are Some Things Mankind Was Not Meant To
Know)

, where he gets a lot of crazy-and dangerous-ideas put into his head about galvanism
and

alchemy. The inevitable result, of course, is the creation of a monster with more
parts than a J.

C. Whitney automotive catalogue. Frankenstein accomplishes this creation in one
long,

delirious burst of activity-and it is in these scenes that Shelley offers us her
most vivid prose.

On the grave robbery necessary to the task at hand:

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Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed
damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? My
limbs now

tremble, and my eyes swim with the remembrance . . . I collected bones from
chapel-houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the

human

frame . . . I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from

their

sockets in attending to the details of my employment.

On the dream which follows the completion of the experiment:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the street of

Ingolstadt.

Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her

lips, they

became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought

that I

held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw

the

graveworms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with

horror; a cold

dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when,

by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window

shutters, I

beheld the wretch-the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain

of

the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws

opened, and

he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks.

Victor responds to this vision as any sane man would; he runs shrieking into the

night. The

remainder of Shelley's story is a Shakespearean tragedy, its classical unity broken only by Ms.

Shelley's uncertainty as to where the fatal flaw lies-is it in Victor's hubris (usurping a power that belongs only to God) or in his failure to take responsibility for his creation after endowing it with the life-spark?

The monster begins its revenge against its creator by killing Frankenstein's little brother,

William. We are not terribly sorry to see William go, by the way; when the monster tries to

befriend the boy, William replies: "Hideous monster! Let me go. My papa is a syndic-he is M.

Frankenstein-he will punish you. You dare not keep me." This piece of rich-kid snottiness is

Willy's last; when the monster hears the name of its creator on the boy's lips, he wrings the

kid's bratty little neck.

A blameless servant in the Frankenstein household, Justine Moritz, is accused of the crime

and is promptly hanged for it-thus doubling the unfortunate Frankenstein's load of guilt. The

monster approaches his creator soon after and tells him the story.* The upshot of the matter is

that he wants a mate. He tells Frankenstein that if his wish is granted, he will take his lady and

the two of them will live out their span in some desolate wasteland (South America is suggested, as New Jersey had not yet been invented), removed from the eye and mind of man forever. The alternative, the monster threatens, is a reign of terror. He voices his

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existential

credo-better to do evil than do nothing at all-by saying, "I will revenge my injuries; if I cannot inspire love, I will cause fear, and chiefly towards you, my arch-enemy, because my creator, do

I swear inextinguishable hatred. Have a care; I will work at your destruction . . .

. I will desolate

your heart, so that you shall curse the hour of your birth."

*Much of the story is unintentionally hilarious. The monster hides in a shed

adjacent to a peasant hut. One of the

peasants, Felix, just happens to be teaching his girlfriend, a runaway Arabian

noblewoman named Safie, his

language; thus the monster learns how to talk. His reading primers are Paradise

Lost, Plutarch's Lives, and The

Sorrows of Werter {sic}, books he has discovered in a cast-off trunk lying in a

ditch. This baroque

tale-within-a-tale is only rivaled in Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, when Crusoe strips

naked, swims out to the

foundering ship that has marooned him, and then, according to Defoe, fills his pockets with all sorts of goodies.

My admiration for such invention knows no bounds.

At length, Victor agrees, and actually does make the woman. He accomplishes this second

act of creation on a desolate island in the Orkney chain, and in these pages Mary Shelley

creates an intensity of mood and atmosphere that nearly rivals the creation of the original.

Doubts assail Frankenstein moments before he is to imbue the creature with life. He imagines

the world desolated by the pair of them. Even worse, he imagines them as a hideous Adam

and Eve of an entire race of monsters. A child of her times, Shelley apparently never

considered the idea that for a man capable of creating life from moldering spare parts, it would

be child's play to create a woman without the capacity for conceiving a child.

The monster turns up immediately after Frankenstein has destroyed its mate, of course; he

has several words for Victor Frankenstein and none of them are "happy birthday." The reign of

terror he has promised takes place like a chain of exploding firecrackers (although in Ms.

Shelley's sedate prose they are more like a roll of caps). Frankenstein's boyhood friend, Henry

Clerval, is strangled by the monster for openers. Shortly thereafter the monster utters the

book's most horrible innuendo; he promises Frankenstein, "I will be with you on your wedding

night." The implications of this threat, for readers of Mary Shelley's time as well as our own, go

beyond murder.

Frankenstein responds to this threat by almost immediately marrying his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth-not one of the book's more believable moments, although hardly in a

class with the abandoned trunk in the ditch or the runaway Arabian noblewoman. On their

wedding night, Victor goes out to confront the creature, having naively assumed that the

monster's threat is against himself. Meanwhile, the monster has broken into the small but

Victor and Elizabeth have taken for the night. Exit Elizabeth. Frankenstein's father

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goes next, a

victim of shock and heartbreak.

Frankenstein pursues his demon creation relentlessly north, into the Arctic wastes, where lie

dies aboard the Polebound ship of Robert Walton, another scientist determined to crack open

the mysteries of God and Nature . . . and the circle neatly closes.

3

So the question arises: How did it happen that this modest gothic tale, which was only about

a hundred pages long in its first draft (Ms. Shelley's husband, Percy, encouraged her to flesh it

out), became caught in a kind of cultural echo chamber, amplifying through the years until, a

hundred and sixty-four years later, we have a cereal called Frankenberry (closely related to

those two other favorites of the breakfast table, Count Chocula and Booberry) ; an old TV

series called The Munsters, which has apparently gone into terminal syndication;

Aurora

Frankenstein model kits, which, when completed, delight the happy young modelmaker with a

glow-in-the-dark creature lurching through a glow-in-the-dark graveyard; and a saying such as

"He looked like Frankenstein" as a kind of apotheosis of ugly?

The most obvious answer to this question is, the movies. The movies did it. And this is a

true answer, as far as it goes. As has been pointed out in film books ad infinitum (and possibly

ad nauseam), the movies have been very good at providing that cultural echo chamber

. . .

perhaps because, in terms of ideas as well as acoustics, the best place to create an

echo is in

a large empty space. In place of the ideas that books and novels give us, the movies

often

substitute large helpings of gut emotion. To this American movies have added a

fierce sense

of image, and the two together create a dazzling show. Take Clint Eastwood in Don

Siegel's

Dirty Harry, for instance. In terms of ideas, the film is an idiotic mishmash. In

terms of image

and emotion-the young kidnap victim being pulled from the cistern at dawn, the bad

guy

terrorizing the busload of children, the granite face of Dirty Harry Callahan

himself-the film is

brilliant. Even the best of liberals walk out of a film like Dirty Harry or

Peckinpah's Straw Dogs

looking as if they have been clopped over the head . . . or run over by a train.

There are films of ideas, of course, ranging all the way from Birth of a Nation to

Annie Hall.

But until a few years ago these were largely the province of foreign filmmakers (the

cinema

"new wave" that broke in Europe from 1946 until about 1965), and these movies have

always

been chancy in America, playing at your neighborhood "art house" with subtitles, if

they play at

all. I think it's easy to misread the success of Woody Allen's later films in this

regard. In

America's urban areas, his films-and films such as *Cousin, Cousine*- generate long lines at

the box office, and they certainly get what George (Night of the Living Dead, Dawn of the

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Dead) Romero calls "good ink," but in the sticks-the quad cinema in Davenport, Iowa, or the

twin in Portsmouth, New Hampshire-these pictures play a fast week or two and then disappear. It is Burt Reynolds in *Smokey and the Bandit* that Americans really seem to take to;

when Americans go to the films, they seem to want billboards rather than ideas; they want to

check their brains at the box office and watch car crashes, custard pies, and

monsters on the

prowl.

Ironically, it took a foreign director, the Italian Sergio Leone, to somehow frame

the

archetypal American movie; to define and typify what most American filmgoers seem to want.

What Leone did in *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and most grandiosely in *The*

Good, The Bad, and The Ugly cannot even properly be called satire. T.G.T.B.A.T.U. in particular is a huge and wonderfully vulgar overstatement of the already overstated archetypes

of American film westerns. In this movie gunshots seem as loud as atomic blasts;

close-ups

seem to go on for minutes at a stretch, gunfights for hours; and the streets of

Leone's peculiar

little Western towns all seem as wide as freeways.

So when one asks who or what turned Mary Shelley's well-spoken monster with his

education from The Sorrows of Young Werther and Paradise Lost into a pop archetype,

the

movies are a perfectly good answer. God knows the movies have turned unlikelier

subjects

into archetypes-scuzzy mountain-men matted with dirt and crawling with lice become

proud

and handsome symbols of the frontier (Robert Redford in Jeremiah Johnson, or pick

the Sunn

International picture of your choice), half-witted killers become representatives of

American's

dying free spirit (Beatty and Dunaway in Bonnie and Clyde), and even incompetency

becomes

myth and archetype, as in the Blake Edwards/Peter Sellers pictures starring the late

Sellers as

Inspector Clouseau. Seen in the context of such archetypes, the American movies have

created their own Tarot deck, and most of us are familiar with the cards, cards such

as the War

Hero (Audie Murphy, John Wayne), the Strong and Silent Peace Officer (Gary Cooper,

Clint

Eastwood), the Whore with the Heart of Gold, the Crazy Hoodlum ("Top of the world, ma!"),

the Ineffectual but Amusing Dad, the Can-Do Mom, the Kid from the Gutter Who Is On His

Way Up, and a dozen others. That all of these creations are stereotypes developed with

varying degrees of cleverness goes without saying, but even in the most inept hands, that

reverberation, that cultural echo, seems to be there.

But we're not discussing the War Hero or the Strong, Silent Peace Officer here; we are

discussing that ever-popular archetype, the Thing Without a Name. For surely if any novel

spans the entire period of book-into-film-into-myth, Frankenstein is that book. It was the

subject of one of the first "story" films ever made, a one-reeler starring Charles Ogle as the

creature. Ogle's conception of the monster caused him to tease his hair and to apparently

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cover his face with partially dried Bisquick. That film was produced by Thomas Edison. The

same archetype is on view today as the subject of the CBS television series The Incredible

Hulk, which has managed to combine two of the archetypes we are discussing here . .

. and to

do so with a fair amount of success (The Incredible Hulk can be seen as a Werewolf story as

well as a Thing story). Although I have to say that each transformation from David Banner into

the Hulk leaves me wondering where the hell the guy's shoes go to and how he gets them

back.*

* "Ole greenskin is back," my seven-year-old son Joe is apt to say comfortably when David Banner begins his

shirt-ripping, pants-shredding transformation. Joe quite rightly sees the Hulk not as a frightening agent of chaos

but as a blind force of nature fated only to do good. Oddly enough, the comforting lesson that many horror movies

seem to teach the young is that fate is kind. Not a bad lesson at all for the little people, who so rightly see

themselves as hostages to forces larger than themselves.

So we begin with the movies-but what has turned Frankenstein into a movie not just once

but again and again and again? One possibility is that the storyline, although constantly

changed (perverted, one is tempted to say) by the filmmakers who have used (and abused) it,

usually contains the wonderful dichotomy that Mary Shelley built into her story: on one hand

the horror writer is an agent of the norm, he or she wants us to watch for the mutant, and we feel Victor Frankenstein's horror and disgust at the relentless, charnel creature he has made.

But on the other hand, we grasp the fact of the creature's innocence and the author's infatuation with the tabula rasa idea.

The monster strangles Henry Clerval and promises Frankenstein he will "be with him on his

wedding night," but the monster is also a creature of childlike pleasure and wonder, who

beholds the "radiant form" of the moon rising above the trees; he brings wood to the poor

peasant family like a good spirit in the night; he seizes the hand of the old blind man, falls on

his knees, and begs him: "Now is the time! Save and protect me! . . . Do not desert me in the

hour of trial!" The creature who strangles snotty William is also the creature who saves a little

girl from drowning . . . and is rewarded with a charge of buckshot in the ass for his pains.

Mary Shelley is-let us bite the bullet and tell the truth-not a particularly strong writer of

emotional prose (which is why students who come to the book with great expectations of a

fast, gory read-expectations formed by the movies-usually come away feeling puzzled

and let

down). She's at her best when Victor and his creation argue the pros and cons of the monster's request for a mate like Harvard debaters-that is to say, she is at her best in the realm of pure ideas. So it's perhaps ironic that the facet of the book which seems

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to have

insured its long attractiveness to the movies is Shelley's splitting of the reader into two people

of opposing minds: the reader who wants to stone the mutation and the reader who feels the

stones and cries out at the injustice of it.

Even so, no moviemaker has gotten all of this idea; probably James Whale came the closest

in his stylish *Bride of Frankenstein*, where the monster's more existential sorrows (young

Werther with bolts through his neck) are boiled down to a more mundane but emotionally

powerful specific: Victor Frankenstein goes ahead and makes the female . . . but she doesn't

like the original monster. Elsa Lanchester, looking like a latter-day Studio 54 disco queen,

screams when he tries to touch her, and we are in perfect sympathy with the monster when he

rips the whole rotten laboratory to pieces.

A fellow named Jack Pierce did Boris Karloff's makeup in the original sound version of

Frankenstein, creating a face as familiar to most of us (if slightly more ugly) as the uncles and

cousins in a family photograph albums-the square head, the dead-white, slightly concave

brow, the scars, the bolts, the heavy eyelids. Universal Pictures copyrighted

Pierce's makeup,

and so when Britain's Hammer Films made their series of Frankenstein movies in the late

fifties and early sixties, a different concept was used. It is probably not as

inspired or as

original as the Pierce makeup (in most cases the Hammer Frankenstein bears a closer resemblance to the unfortunate Gary Conway in *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein*), but the two

have one thing in common: although in both cases the monster is horrible to look at, there is

also something so sad, so miserable there that our hearts actually go out to the creature even

as they are shrinking away from it in fear and disgust.*

*The greatest of the Hammer Frankenstein monsters was probably Christopher Lee, who went on to nearly

eclipse Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula. Lee, a great actor, is the only man to approach Karloff's interpretation of

the role, although Karloff was far more fortunate in matters of script and

direction. All in all, Christopher Lee fared

better as a vampire.

As I've said, most directors who have tried their hands at a Frankenstein film (with

the

exception of those played exclusively for laughs) have sensed this dichotomy and

tried to use

it. Breathes there a moviegoer with soul so dead who never wished the monster would

jump

down from that burning windmill and stuff those torches right down the throats of

those

ignorant slobs so dedicated to ending its life? I doubt if there is such a

moviegoer, and if there

is, he must be hardhearted indeed. But I don't believe any director has caught the

full pathos of

the situation, and there is no Frankenstein movie that will bring tears to the eyes

as readily as

the final reel of King Kong, where the big ape straddles the top of the Empire State

Building

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and tries to fight off those machinegun-equipped biplanes as if they were the

prehistoric birds

of his native island. Like Eastwood in Leone's spaghetti westerns, Kong is the

archetype of the

archetype. We see the horror of being a monster in the eyes of Boris Karloff and,

later, in those

of Christopher Lee; in King Kong it is spread across the ape's entire face, due to

the marvelous

special effects of Willis O'Brien. The result is almost a cartoon of the friendless,

dying outsider.

It is one of the great fusions of love and horror, innocence and terror, the

emotional reality

which Mary Shelley only suggests in her novel. Even so, I suspect she would have

understood

and agreed with Dino De Laurentiis's remark on the great attraction of that

dichotomy. De

Laurentiis was speaking of his own forgettable remake of King Kong, but he could

have been

speaking about the hapless monster itself when he said, "Nobody cry when jaws die."

Well, we

don't exactly cry when Frankenstein's monster dies-not the way audiences weep when

Kong,

that shanghaied hostage of a simpler, more romantic world, topples from his perch

atop the

Empire State-but we are, perhaps, disgusted at our own sense of relief.

4

Although the gathering which ultimately resulted in Mary Shelley's writing of

Frankenstein

took place on the shores of Lake Geneva, miles from British soil, it must still

qualify as one of

the maddest British tea parties of all time. And in a funny way, the gathering may

have been

responsible not only for Frankenstein, published that same year, but for Dracula as

well, a

novel written by a man who would not be born for another thirty-one years.

It was June of 1816, and the band of travelers-Percy and Mary Shelley, Lord Byron,

and

Dr. John Polidori-had been confined to quarters by two weeks of torrential rains.

They began

a joint reading of German ghost stories from a book called Fantasmagoria, and the

gathering

began to get decidedly weird. Things really culminated when Percy Shelley threw a

kind of fit.

Dr. Polidori noted in his diary: "After tea, 12 o'clock, really began to talk

ghosts. Lord Byron

read some verses of Coleridge's 'Christabel,' (the part about) the witch's breast;

when silence

ensued, Shelley, suddenly shrieking, and putting his hands to his head, ran out of

the room

with a candle. [I] Threw water in his face and after gave him ether. He was looking

at Mrs.

Shelley, and suddenly thought of a woman he had heard of who had eyes instead of

nipples;

which, taking hold of his mind, horrified him."

Leave it to the English.

An agreement was made that each member of the party would try his or her hand at

creating a new ghost story. It was Mary Shelley, whose work as a result of the gathering would

alone endure, who had the most trouble in setting to work. She had no ideas at all, and several

nights passed before her imagination was fired by a nightmare in which "a pale

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student of

unhallowed arts created the awful phantom of a man." It is the creation scene

presented in

chapters four and five of her novel (quoted from earlier).

Percy Bysshe Shelley produced a fragment entitled "The Assassins." George Gordon

Byron

produced an interesting macabre tale titled "The Burial." But it is John Polidori,

the good

doctor, who is sometimes mentioned as a possible link to Bram Stoker and Dracula.

His short

story was later expanded to novel length and became a great success. It was called

"The

Vampyre."

In point of fact, Polidori's novel isn't very good . . . and it bears an

uncomfortable

resemblance to "The Burial," the short story written by his immeasurably more

talented patient,

Lord Byron. There is perhaps a breath of plagiarism there. We do know that Byron and

Polidori

argued violently shortly after the interlude at Lake Geneva, and that their friendship ended. It is not entirely beyond supposition that the similarity between the two tales was the cause.

Polidori, who was twenty-one at the time he wrote "The Vampyre," came to an unhappy end.

The success of the novel he developed from his story encouraged him to retire from the

doctoring profession and to become a full-time writer. He had little success at writing, although

he was quite good at piling up gambling debts. When he felt his reputation had become

irredeemably impugned, he behaved as we would expect of an English gentleman of the day and shot himself.

Stoker's turn-of-the-century horror novel *Dracula* bears only a slight resemblance to Polidori's *The Vampyre*- the field is a narrow one, as we will point out again and again, and

exclusive of any willful imitation, the family resemblance is always there-but we can be sure

that Stoker was aware of Polidori's novel. One believes, after reading *Dracula*, that Stoker left

no stone unturned as he researched the project. Is it so far-fetched to believe that he might

have read Polidori's novel, have been excited by the subject matter, and determined

to write a

better book? I like to believe this might be so, much as I like to believe that

Polidori really did

crib his idea from Lord Byron. That would make Byron the literary grandfather of the

legendary

Count, who boasts early on to Jonathan Harker that he drove the Turks from

Transylvania . . .

and Byron himself died while aiding the Greek insurgents against the Turks in 1824,

eight

years after the gathering with the Shelleys and Polidori on the shores of Lake

Geneva. It was a

death of which the Count himself would have greatly approved.

5

All tales of horror can be divided into two groups: those in which the horror

results from an

act of free and conscious will-a conscious decision to do evil-and those in which

the horror

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is predestinate, coming from outside like a stroke of lightning. The most classic

horror tale of

this latter type is the Old Testament story of Job, who becomes the human Astro-Turf

in a kind

of spiritual Superbowl between God and Satan.

The stories of horror which are psychological-those which explore the terrain of the

human

heart-almost always revolve around the freewill concept; "inside evil," if you will,
the sort we
have no right laying off on God the Father. This is Victor Frankenstein creating a
living being
out of spare parts to satisfy his own hubris, and then compounding his sin by
refusing to take
the responsibility for what he has done. It is Dr. Henry Jekyll, who creates Mr.
Hyde essentially
out of Victorian hypocrisy-he wants to be able to carouse and party-down without
anyone,
even the lowliest Whitechapel drab, knowing that he is anything but saintly Dr.
Jekyll whose
feet are "ever treading the upward path." Perhaps the best tale of inside evil ever
written is
Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," where murder is committed out of pure evil, with no
mitigating
circumstances whatever to tincture the brew. Poe suggests we will call his narrator
mad
because we must always believe that such perfect, motiveless evil is mad, for the
sake of our
own sanity.
Novels and stories of horror which deal with "outside evil" are often harder to take
seriously;
they are apt to be no more than boys' adventure yarns in disguise, and in the end
the nasty

invaders from outer space are repelled; or at the last possible instant the Handsome Young

Scientist comes up with the gimmick solution . . . as when, in Beginning of the End, Peter

Graves creates a sonic gun which draws all the giant grasshoppers into Lake Michigan.

And yet it is the concept of outside evil that is larger, more awesome. Lovecraft grasped this,

and it is what makes his stories of stupendous, Cyclopean evil so effective when they are

good. Many aren't, but when Lovecraft was on the money-as in "The Dunwich Horror," "The

Rats in the Walls," and best of all, "The Colour Out of Space"-his stories packed an incredible

wallop. The best of them make us feel the size of the universe we hang suspended in, and

suggest shadowy forces that could destroy us all if they so much as grunted in their sleep.

After all, what is the paltry inside evil of the A-bomb when compared to Nyarlathotep, the

Crawling Chaos, or Yog-Sothoth, the Goat with a Thousand Young?

Bram Stoker's Dracula seems a remarkable achievement to me because it humanizes the outside evil concept; we grasp it in a familiar way Lovecraft never allowed, and we can feel its

texture. It is an adventure story, but it never degenerates to the level of Edgar Rice Burroughs

or Varney the Vampyre.

Stoker achieves the effect to a large degree by keeping the evil literally outside

for most of

his long story. The Count is onstage almost constantly during the first four

chapters, dueling

with Jonathan Harker, pressing him slowly to the wall ("Later there will be kisses

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for all of

you," Harker hears him tell the three weird sisters as he [Harker] lies in a

semiswoon) . . . and

then he disappears for most of the book's three hundred or so remaining pages.* It

is one of

English literature's most remarkable and engaging tricks, a trompe l'oeil that has

rarely been

matched. Stoker creates his fearsome, immortal monster much the way a child can

create the

shadow of a giant rabbit on the wall simply by wiggling his fingers in front of a

light.

*The Count appears onstage another half-dozen times, most splendidly in Mina Murray

Harker's bedroom. The

men in her life burst into her room following the death of Renfield and are greeted

with a scene worthy of Bosch:

the Count clutching Mina, his face slathered with her blood. In an obscene parody of

the marriage sacrament, he

opens a vein in his own chest with one dirty fingernail and forces her to drink.

Other glimpses of the Count are

less powerful. We glimpse him once strolling along an avenue in a foppish straw hat,

and once ogling a pretty girl

like any run-of-the-mill dirty old man.

The Count's evil seems totally predestinate; the fact that he comes to London with

its

"teeming millions" does not proceed from any mortal being's evil act. Harker's

ordeal at Castle

Dracula is not the result of any inner sin or weakness; he winds up on the Count's

doorstep

because his boss asked him to go. Similarly, the death of Lucy Westenra is not a

deserved

death. Her encounter with Dracula in the Whitby churchyard is the moral equivalent

of being

struck by lightning while playing golf. There is nothing in her life to justify the

end she comes to

at the hands of Van Helsing and her fiancé, Arthur Holmwood-her heart burst apart by

a

stake, her head chopped off, her mouth stuffed with garlic.

It is not that Stoker is ignorant of inside evil or the Biblical concept of free

will; in Dracula the

concept is embodied by that most engaging of maniacs, Mr. Renfield, who also

symbolizes the

root source of vampirism-cannibalism. Renfield, who is working his way up to the big

leagues

the hard way (he begins by snacking on flies, progresses to munching on spiders, then to dining on birds), invites the Count into Dr. Seward's madhouse knowing perfectly well what he is doing-but to suggest he is a large enough character to take responsibility for all the terrors that follow is to suggest the absurd. His character, though engaging, is just not strong enough to take that weight. We assume that if Dracula hadn't gotten in by using Renfield, he would have gotten in another way.

In a way it was the mores of Stoker's day which dictated that the Count's evil should come from outside, because much of the evil embodied in the Count is a perverse sexual evil. Stoker revitalized the vampire legend largely by writing a novel which fairly pants with sexual energy.

The Count doesn't ever attack Jonathan Harker; in fact he is promised to the weird

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sisters who

live in the castle with him. Harker's one brush with these voluptuous but lethal harpies is a

sexual one, and it is presented in his diary in terms that were, for turn-of-the-century England,

pretty graphic:

The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, simply gloating. There was a deliberate

voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining

on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the sharp white teeth . . .

Then she

paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips,

and could feel the hot breath on my neck . . . I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the

lips on the super-sensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just

touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a langourous ecstasy and

waited-waited

with beating heart.

In the England of 1897, a girl who "went on her knees" was not the sort of girl you brought

home to meet your mother; Harker is about to be orally raped. and he doesn't mind a bit. And

it's all right, because he is not responsible. In matters of sex, a highly moralistic society can

find a psychological escape valve in the concept of outside evil: this thing is bigger than both of

us, baby. Harker is a bit disappointed when the Count enters and breaks up this

little

tête-à-tête. Probably most of Stoker's wide-eyed readers were, too.

Similarly, the Count preys only on women: first Lucy, then Mina. Lucy's reactions to the

Count's bite are much the same as Jonathan's feelings about the weird sisters. To be perfectly

vulgar, Stoker indicates in a fairly classy way that Lucy is coming her brains out.

By day an

ever-more-pallid but perfectly Apollonian Lucy conducts a proper and decorous courtship with

her promised husband, Arthur Holmwood. By night she carouses in Dionysian abandon with

her dark and bloody seducer.

In real life at this same time, England was experiencing a mesmerism fad. Franz Mesmer,

the father of what we now call hypnotism, was at that time giving demonstrations of the feat.

Like the Count, Mesmer preferred young girls, and he would put them into a trance by stroking

their bodies . . . all over. Many of his female subjects experienced "wonderful feelings that

seemed to culminate in a burst of pleasure." It seems likely that these "culminating bursts of

pleasure" were in fact orgasms-but very few unmarried women of the day would have known

an orgasm if it bit them on the nose, and the effect was simply seen as one of the pleasanter

side effects of a scientific process. Many of these girls came to Mesmer and begged to be

mesmerized again; "The men don't like it but the little girls understand," as the

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old rhythm and

blues song goes. Anyway, the point made in regard to vampirism applies just as well to

mesmerism: the "culminating burst of pleasure" was all right because it came from outside; she

experiencing the pleasure could not be held responsible.

These strong sexual undertones are surely one reason why the movies have conducted such a long love affair with the Vampire, beginning with Max Schreck in *Nosferatu*, continuing

through the Lugosi interpretation (1931), the Christopher Lee interpretation, right up to

'*Salem's Lot* (1979) , where Reggie Nalder's interpretation brings us full circle to Max Schreck's

again.

When all else is said and done, it's a chance to show women in scanty nightclothes, and

guys giving the sleeping ladies some of the worst hickeys you ever saw, and to enact, over

and over, a situation of which movie audiences never seem to tire: the primal rape

scene.

But maybe there's even more going on here sexually than first meets the eye. Early

on I

mentioned my own. belief that much of the horror story's attraction for us is that

it allows us to

vicariously exercise those antisocial emotions and feelings which society demands we

keep

stoppered up under most circumstances, for society's good and our own. Anyway,

Dracula

sure isn't a book about "normal" sex; there's no Missionary Position going on here.

Count

Dracula (and the weird sisters as well) are apparently dead from the waist down;

they make

love with their mouths alone. The sexual basis of Dracula is an infantile oralism

coupled with a

strong interest in necrophilia (and pedophilia, some would say, considering Lucy in

her role as

the "bloofer lady"). It is also sex without responsibility, and in the unique and

amusing term

coined by Erica Jong, the sex in Dracula can be seen as the ultimate zipless fuck.

This

infantile, retentive attitude toward sex may be one reason why the vampire myth,

which in

Stoker's hands seems to say "I will rape you with my mouth and you will love it;

instead of

contributing potent fluid to your body, I will remove it," has always been so popular with adolescents still trying to come to grips with their own sexuality. The vampire appears to have found a short-cut through all the tribal mores of sex . . . and he lives forever, to boot.

6

There are other interesting elements in Stoker's book, all sorts of them, but it is the elements of outside evil and sexual invasion that seem to have powered the novel most strongly. We can see the legacy of Stoker's weird sisters in the wonderfully lush and voluptuous vampires in Hammer's 1960 film, *Brides of Dracula* (and also be assured in the best moralistic tradition of the horror movie that the wages of kinky sex are a stake through the heart while catching some z's in your coffin) and dozens of other movies both before and after.

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When I wrote my own vampire novel, *'Salem's Lot*, I decided to largely jettison the sexual angle, feeling that in a society where homosexuality, group sex, oral sex, and even, God save us, water sports have become matters of public discussion (not to mention, if you believe the

Forum column in Penthouse, sex with various fruits and vegetables), the sexual engine that powered much of Stoker's book might have run out of gas.

To some degree that is probably true. Hazel Court constantly falling out of the top of her dress (well . . . almost) in AIP's *The Raven* (1963) looks nearly comic today, not to mention Bela Lugosi's corny Valentino imitation in Universal's *Dracula*, which even hardened horror aficionados and cinema buffs cannot help giggling over. But sex will almost certainly continue to be a driving force in the horror genre; sex that is sometimes presented in disguised, Freudian terms, such as Lovecraft's vaginal creation, Great Cthulhu. After viewing this manytentacled, slimy, gelid creature through Lovecraft's eyes, do we need to wonder why Lovecraft manifested "little interest" in sex?

Much of the sex in horror fiction is deeply involved in power tripping; it's sex based upon relationships where one partner is largely under the control of the other; sex which almost inevitably leads to some bad end. I refer you, for instance, to *Alien*, where the two women crew members are presented in perfectly nonsexist terms until the climax, where Sigourney

Weaver

must battle the terrible interstellar hitchhiker that has even managed to board her tiny space

lifeboat. During this final battle, Ms. Weaver is dressed in bikini panties and a thin T-shirt,

every inch the woman, and at this point interchangeable with any of Dracula's victims in the

Hammer cycle of films in the sixties. The point seems to be, "The girl was okay until she got

undressed." *

*I thought there was another extremely sexist interlude in Alien, one that disappoints on a plot level no matter

how you feel about women's ability as compared to men's. The Sigourney Weaver character, who is presented as

toughminded and heroic up to this point, causes the destruction of the mothership Nostromo (and perhaps helps

to cause the deaths of the two other remaining crew members) by going after the ship's cat. Enabling the males in

the audience, of course, to relax, roll their eyes at each other, and say either aloud or telepathically, "Isn't that just

like a woman?" It is a plot twist which depends upon a sexist idea for its believability, and we might well answer

the question asked above by asking in turn, "Isn't that just like a male chauvinist pig of a Hollywood scriptwriter?"

This gratuitous little twist doesn't spoil the movie, but it's still sort of a bummer.

The business of creating horror is much the same as the business of paralyzing an opponent with the martial arts-it is the business of finding vulnerable points and then applying pressure there. The most obvious psychological pressure point is the fact of our own

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mortality.

Certainly it is the most universal. But in a society that sets such a great store by physical

beauty (in a society, that is, where a few pimples become the cause of psychic agony) and

sexual potency, a deep-seated uneasiness and ambivalence about sex becomes another natural pressure point, one that the writer of the horror story or film gropes for instinctively. In

the bare-chested sword-and-sorcery epics of Robert E. Howard, for instance, the female

"heavies" are presented as monsters of sexual depravity, indulging in exhibitionism and

sadism. As previously pointed out, one of the most tried-and-true movie poster concepts of all

time shows the monster-whether it be a BEM (bug-eyed monster) from This Island Earth or the

mummy for Hammer's 1959 remake of the Universal film-striding through the darkness or the

smoking ruins of some city with the body of an unconscious lovely in its arms.

Beauty and the

beast. You are in my power. Heh-heh-heh. It's that primal rape scene again. And the primal,

perverse rapist is the Vampire, stealing not only sexual favors but life itself. And best of all,

perhaps, in the eyes of those millions of teenaged boys who have watched the Vampire take

wing and then flutter down inside the bedroom of some sleeping young lady, is the fact that the

Vampire doesn't even have to get it up to do it. What better news to those on the threshold of

the sexual sphere, most of whom have been taught (as certainly they have been, not in the

least by the movies themselves) that successful sexual relationships are based upon man's

domination and woman's submission? The joker in this deck is that most fourteen-year-old

boys who have only recently discovered their own sexual potential feel capable of dominating

only the centerfold in Playboy with total success. Sex makes young adolescent boys feel many

things, but one of them, quite frankly, is scared. The horror film in general and the Vampire film

in particular confirms the feeling. Yes, it says; sex is scary; sex is dangerous.

And I can prove

it to you right here and now. Sit down, kid. Grab your popcorn. I want to tell you a

story

7

Enough of sexual portents, at least for the time being. Let's flip up the third card

in this

uneasy Tarot hand. Forget Michael Landon and AIP for the time being. Gaze, if you

dare, on

the face of the real Werewolf. His name, gentle reader, is Edward Hyde.

Robert Louis Stevenson conceived Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as a shocker, pure and

simple, a

potboiler and, hopefully, a money machine. It so horrified his wife that Stevenson

burned the

first draft and rewrote it, injecting a little moral uplift to please his spouse. Of

the three books

under discussion here, Jekyll and Hyde is the shortest (it runs about seventy pages

in close

type) and undoubtedly the most stylish. If Bram Stoker serves us great whacks of

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horror in

Dracula, leaving us, after Harker's confrontation with Dracula in Transylvania, the

staking of

Lucy Westenra, the death of Renfield and the branding of Mina, feeling as if we have

been hit

square in the chops by a two-by-four, then Stevenson's brief and cautionary tale is

like the

quick, mortal stab of an icepick.

Like a police-court trial (to which the critic G. K. Chesterton compared it), we get the

narrative through a series of different voices, and it is through the testimony of those involved

that Dr. Jekyll's unhappy tale unfolds.

It begins as Jekyll's lawyer, Mr. Utterson, and a distant cousin, one Richard Enfield, stroll

through London one morning. As they pass "a certain sinister block of building" with "a blind

forehead of discoloured wall" and a door which is "blistered and distained," Enfield is moved to

tell Utterson a story about that particular door. He was on the scene one early morning, he

says, when he observed two people approaching the corner from opposite directions—a man

and a little girl. They collide. The girl is knocked flat and the man—Edward Hyde—simply goes

on walking, trampling the screaming child underfoot. A crowd gathers (what all of these people

are doing abroad at three A.M. of a cold winter's morning is never explained; perhaps they

were all discussing what Robinson Crusoe used for pockets when he swam out to the foundering ship), and Enfield collars Mr. Hyde. Hyde is a man of so loathsome a countenance

that Enfield is actually obliged to protect him from the mob, which seems on the

verge of

tearing him apart: "We were keeping the women off as best we could, for they were as

wild as

harpies," Enfield tells Utterson. Moreover, the doctor who was summoned "turn[ed]

sick and

white with desire to kill him." Once again we see the horror writer as an agent of

the norm; the

crowd that has gathered is watching faithfully for the mutant, and in the loathsome

Mr. Hyde

they seem to have found the genuine article-although Stevenson is quick to tell us,

through

Enfield, that outwardly there appears to be nothing much wrong with Hyde. Although

he's no

John Travolta, he's certainly no Michael Landon sporting a pelt above his high

school jacket,

either.

Hyde, Enfield admits to Utterson, "carried it off like Satan." When Enfield demands

compensation in the name of the little girl, Hyde disappears through the door under

discussion

and returns a short time later with a hundred pounds, ten in gold and a check for

the balance.

Although Enfield won't tell, we find out in due course that the signature on the

check was that

of Henry Jekyll.

Enfield closes his account with one of the most telling descriptions of the Werewolf

in all of

horror fiction. Although it describes very little in the way we usually think of description, it says

a great deal—we all know what Stevenson means, and he knew we would, because he knew,

apparently, that all of us are old hands at watching for the mutant:

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He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I

scarcely know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. He's an extraordinary looking man, and yet I

can really name nothing out of the way And it's not for want of memory; for

I declare I

can see him this moment.

It was Rudyard Kipling, years later and in another tale, who named what was

bothering

Enfield about Mr. Hyde. Wolfsbane and potions aside (and Stevenson himself dismissed the

device of the smoking potion as "so much hugger-mugger"), it is very simple:

somewhere upon

Mr. Hyde, Enfield sensed what Kipling called the Mark of the Beast.

8

Utterson has information of his own with which Enfield's tale neatly dovetails (God,

the

construction of Stevenson's novel is beautiful; it ticks smoothly away like a well-made watch).

He has custody of Jekyll's will and knows that Jekyll's heir is Edward Hyde. He also knows that

the door Enfield has pointed out stands at the back of Jekyll's townhouse.

A bit of a swerve off the main road here. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was published a good

three decades before the ideas of Sigmund Freud would begin to surface, but in the first two

sections of Stevenson's novella the author gives us a startlingly apt metaphor for Freud's idea

of the conscious and subconscious minds-or, to be more specific, the contrast between

superego and id. Here is one large block of buildings. On Jekyll's side, the side presented to

the public eye, it seems a lovely, graceful building, inhabited by one of London's most

respected physicians. On the other side-but still a part of the same building-we find rubbish

and squalor, people abroad on questionable errands at three in the morning, and that

"blistered and distained door" set in "a blind forehead of discoloured wall." On

Jekyll's side, all

things are in order and life goes its steady Apollonian round. On the other side,

Dionysus

prances unfettered. Enter Jekyll here, exit Hyde there. Even if you're an anti-Freudian and won't grant Stevenson's insight into the human psyche, you'll perhaps grant that the building serves as a nice symbol for the duality of human nature.

Well, back to business. The next witness of any real importance in the case is a maid who witnesses the murder which turns Hyde into a fugitive from the scaffold. It's the murder of Sir Danvers Carew, and as Stevenson sketches it for us we hear echoes of every nasty murder to hit the tabloids in our time: Richard Speck and the student nurses, Juan Corona, even the unfortunate Dr. Herman Tarnower. Here is the beast caught in the act of pulling down its weak and unsuspecting prey, acting not with cunning and intelligence but only with stupid, nihilistic

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danse macabre Stephen King violence. Can anything be worse? Yes, apparently one thing: his face is not so terribly different from the face you and I see in the bathroom mirror each morning.

And then all of a sudden he broke out in a great flame of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane, and carrying on . . . like a madman. The old gentleman took a step

back, with the air of one very much surprised and a trifle hurt; and at that Mr.

Hyde broke

out of all bonds and clubbed him to the earth. And next moment, with ape-like fury,

he was

trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows, under which the

bones

were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway. At the horror of these

sights and sounds, the maid fainted.

All that's really lacking here to make the tabloid picture complete is a scrawl of

LITTLE

PIGGIES or HELTER SKELTER on a nearby wall, written in the victim's blood. Stevenson

further informs us that "The stick with which the deed had been done, although it

was of some

rare and very tough and heavy wood, had broken in the middle under the stress of

this

insensate cruelty; and one splintered half had rolled in the neighbouring gutter . .

. ."

Stevenson, here and in other places, describes Hyde as "ape-like." He suggests that

Hyde,

like Michael Landon in *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, is a step backward along the

evolutionary

scale, something vicious in the human makeup that has not yet been bred out . . .

and isn't that

what really frightens us in the myth of the Werewolf? This is inside evil with a

vengeance, and

it is no wonder that clergymen of Stevenson's day hailed his story. They apparently knew a parable when they read one, and saw Hyde's vicious caning of Sir Danvers Carew as the old Adam coming out full blast. Stevenson suggests that the Werewolf's face is our face, and it takes some of the humor out of Lou Costello's famous comeback to Lon Chaney, Jr. in Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein. Chaney, playing the persecuted skin-changing Larry Talbot, mourns to Costello: "You don't understand. When the moon rises, I'll turn into a wolf." Costello replies: "Yeah . . . you and about five million other guys."

At any rate, Carew's murder leads the police to Hyde's Soho flat. The bird has flown the coop, but the Scotland Yard inspector in charge of the investigation is sure they'll get him, because Hyde has burned his checkbook. "Why, money's life to the man. We have nothing to do but wait for him at the bank, and get out the handbills."

But Hyde, of course, has another identity he can turn to. Jekyll, at last frightened back to reason, determines never to use the potion again. Then he discovers to his horror that the change has begun to occur spontaneously. He has created Hyde to escape the strictures of

propriety, but has discovered that evil has its own strictures; in the end he has become Hyde's

prisoner. The clergy hailed Jekyll and Hyde because they believed the book showed

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the grim

results of allowing man's "baser nature" more than the shortest possible tether;

modern

readers are more apt to sympathize with Jekyll as a man looking for an escape

route-if only

for short periods-from the straitjacket of Victorian prudery and morality. Either

way, when

Utterson and Jekyll's butler, Poole, break into Jekyll's laboratory, Jekyll is dead

. . . and it is the

body of Hyde which they find. The worst horror of all has occurred; the man has died

thinking

like Jekyll and looking like Hyde, the secret sin (or the Mark of the Beast, if you

prefer) which

he hoped to conceal (or to Hyde, if you prefer) stamped indelibly on his face. He

concludes his

confession with the words, "Here then, as I lay down the pen and proceed to seal up

my

confession, I bring the life of that unhappy Dr. Jekyll to an end."

It's easy-too easy-to get caught up in the story of Jekyll and his ferocious alter

ego as a

religious parable told in penny-dreadful terms. It's a moral tale, sure, but it seems to me that it's also a close study of hypocrisy-its causes, its dangers, its damages to the spirit. Jekyll is the hypocrite who falls into the pit of secret sin; Utterson, the book's real hero, is Jekyll's exact opposite. Because this seems important, not only to Stevenson's book but to the whole idea of the Werewolf, let me take a minute of your time to quote from the book again.

Here's how he introduces Utterson to us on page one of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: Mr. Utterson the lawyer was a man of rugged countenance that was never lighted by a smile; cold, scanty, and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary and yet somehow lovable.* . . . He was austere with himself; drank gin when he was alone to mortify a taste for vintages; and though he enjoyed the theater, had not crossed the doors of one for twenty years.

*I must admit that, after reading Stevenson's description of Utterson, I found myself curious as to just how he was lovable!

About the Ramones, an amusing punk-rock band that surfaced some four years ago, Linda Ronstadt is on record as saying, "That music's so tight it's hemorrhoidal." You could say the same thing for Utterson, who fulfills the function of court stenographer in the book

and still

manages to come off as the story's most engaging character. He's a Victorian prig of the first

water, of course, and one would fear for a son or daughter brought up by the old man, but

Stevenson's point is that there is as little of the hypocrite in him as there is in any man living.

("We may sin in thought, word, or deed," the old Methodist credo goes, and I suppose that by

thinking of fine vintages while he knocks off his gin-and-water, we could say that

Utterson is a

hypocrite in thought . . . but here we're entering a fuzzy gray area where the concept of free

will seems harder to grasp; "The mind is a monkey," Robert Stone's protagonist muses

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in Dog

Soldiers, and he is so right.)

The difference between Utterson and Jekyll is that Jekyll would only drink gin to mortify a

taste for vintages in public. In the privacy of his own library he's the sort of man who might well

drink an entire bottle of good port (and probably congratulate himself on not having to share it,

or any of his fine Jamaican cigars, either). Perhaps he would not want to be caught

dead

attending a risqué play in the West End, but he is more than happy to go as Hyde.

Jekyll does

not want to mortify any of his tastes. He only wants to gratify them in secret.

9

All of that is very interesting, you may be saying, but the fact is there hasn't

been a good

Werewolf movie in ten or fifteen years (a couple of pretty dismal made-for-TV

movies, such as

Moon of the Wolf, but they hardly count); and although there have been a good number

of

Jekylland-Hyde movies, * I don't believe there has been a full-fledged remake (or

ripoff) of

Stevenson's story since American-International's Daughter of Dr. Jekyll in the late

fifties, and

that was a sad comedown for one of the original Mad Doctors, a figure that most

horror buffs

view with a great deal of affection.

*Three great actors took the dual role: John Barrymore (1920), Fredric March (1932),

and Spencer Tracey

(1941). March won an Academy Award for the role, earning him the distinction of

being the only actor ever to win

the award for Best Actor as a result of his efforts in a horror movie.

But remember that what we're talking about here, at its most basic level, is the old

conflict

between id and superego, the free will to do evil or to deny it . . . or in

Stevenson's own terms,
the conflict between mortification and gratification. This old struggle is the
cornerstone of
Christianity, but if you want to put it in mythic terms, the twinning of Jekyll and
Hyde suggests
another duality: the aforementioned split between the Apollonian (the creature of
intellect,
morality, and nobility, "always treading the upward path") and the Dionysian (god of
partying
and physical gratification; the get-down-and-boogie side of human nature). If you
try to take it
any further than the mythic, you come damn close to splitting the body and mind
altogether . . .
which is exactly the impression Jekyll wants to give his friends: that he is a
creature of pure
mind, with no human tastes or needs at all. It's hard to picture the guy sitting on
the fakes with
a newspaper.
If we look at the Jekyll and Hyde story as a pagan conflict between man's Apollonian
potential and his Dionysian desires, we see that the Werewolf myth does indeed run
through a
great many modern horror novels and movies.
Perhaps the best example of all is Alfred Hitchcock's film Psycho, although in all
deference to
the master, the idea was there for the taking in Robert Bloch's novel. Bloch, in

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fact, had been

honing this particular vision of human nature in a number of previous books,

including The

Scarf (which begins with those wonderful, eerie lines: "Fetish? You name it. All I

know is that

I've always had to have it with me . . .") and The Deadbeat. These books are not,

at least

technically, horror novels; there is nary a monster or supernatural occurrence on

view. They

are labeled "suspense novels." But if we look at them with that Apollonian/Dionysian

conflict in

mind, we see that they are very much horror novels; each of them deals with the

Dionysian

psychopath locked up behind the Apollonian facade of normality . . . but slowly,

dreadfully

emerging. In short, Bloch has written a number of Werewolf novels in which he has

dispensed

with the hugger-mugger of the potion or the wolfsbane. What happened with Bloch when

lie

ceased writing his Lovecraftian stories of the supernatural (and he never has,

completely; see

the recent Strange Eons) was not that he ceased being a horror writer; lie simply

shifted his

perspective from the outside (beyond the stars, under the sea, on the Plains of

Leng, or in the

deserted belfry of a Providence, Rhode Island, church) to the inside . . . to the

place where the

Werewolf is. It may be that someday these three novels, *The Scarf*, *The Deadbeat*, and

Psycho, will be anthologized as a kind of unified triptych, as were James M. Cam's

The

Postman Always Ring Twice, *Double Indemnity*, and *Mildred Pierce*- for in their own

way, the

novels that Robert Bloch wrote in the 1950s had every bit as much influence on the

course of

American fiction as did the Cain "heel-with-a-heart" novels of the 1930s. And

although the

method of attack is radically different in each case, both the novels of Cain and

Bloch are great

crime novels; the novels of both adopt a naturalistic view of American life; the

novels of both

explore the idea of protagonist as antihero; and the novels of both point up the

central

Apollonian/ Dionysian conflict and thus become Werewolf novels.

Psycho, the best known of the three, deals with Norman Bates-and as played by

Anthony

Perkins in the Hitchcock film, Norman is about as tight-assed and hemorrhoidal as

they come.

To the observing world (or that small part of it that would care to observe the

proprietor of a

gone-to-seed backwater motel), Norman is as normal as they come. Charles Whitman,
the

Apollonian Eagle Scout who went on a Dionysian rampage from the top of the Texas
Tower,

comes immediately to mind; Norman seems like such a nice fellow. Certainly Janet
Leigh sees

no reason to fear him in the closing moments of her life.

But Norman is the Werewolf. Only instead of growing hair, his change is effected by
donning

his dead mother's panties, slip, and dress-and hacking up the guests instead of
biting them.

As Dr. Jekyll keeps secret rooms in Soho and has his own "Mr. Hyde door" at home, so
we

discover that Norman has his own secret place where his two personae meet: in this

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case it is

a loophole behind a picture, which he uses to watch the ladies undress.

Psycho is effective because it brings the Werewolf myth home. It is not outside
evil,

predestination; the fault lies not in our stars but in ourselves. We know that

Norman is only

outwardly the Werewolf when he's wearing Mom's duds and speaking in Mom's voice; but
we

have the uneasy suspicion that inside he's the Werewolf all the time.

Psycho spawned a score of imitators, most of them immediately recognizable by their

titles,

which suggested more than a few toys in the attic: Straitjacket (Joan Crawford does

the

ax-wielding honors in this gritty if somewhat overplotted film, made from a Bloch

script),

Dementia-13 (Francis Coppola's first feature film), Nightmare (a Hammer picture),

Repulsion.

These are only a few of the children of Hitchcock's film, which was adapted for the

screen by

Joseph Stefano. Stefano went on to pilot television's Outer Limits, which we will

get to

eventually.

10

It would be ridiculous for me to suggest that all modern horror fiction, both in

print and on

celluloid, can be boiled down to these three archetypes. It would simplify things

enormously,

but it would be a false simplification, even with the Tarot card of the Ghost thrown

in for good

measure. It doesn't end with the Thing, the Vampire, and the Werewolf; there are

other bogeys

out there in the shadows as well. But these three account for a large bloc of modern

horror

fiction. We can see the blurry shape of the Thing Without a Name in Howard Hawks's

The

Thing (it turns out-rather disappointingly, I always thought-to be big Jim Arness
tricked out
as a vegetable from space) ; the Werewolf raises its shaggy head as Olivia de
Havilland in
Lady in a Cage and as Bette Davis in What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?; and we can
see
the shadow of the Vampire in such diverse films as Them! and George Romero's Night
of the
Living Dead and Dawn of the Dead . . . although in these latter two, the symbolic
act of
blood-drinking has been replaced by the act of cannibalism itself as the dead chomp
into the
flesh of their living victims.*

*Romero's Martin is a classy and visually sensuous rendering of the Vampire myth,
and one of the few
examples of the myth consciously examined in film, as Romero contrasts the romantic
assumptions so vital to the
myth (as in the John Badham version of Dracula) with the grisly reality of actually
drinking blood as it spurts from
the veins of the vampire's chosen victim.

It is also undeniable that filmmakers seem to return again and again to these three
great
monsters, and I think that in large part it's because they really are archetypes;
which is to say,
clay that can be easily molded in the hands of clever children, which is exactly

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what so many

of the filmmakers who work in the genre seem to be.

Before leaving these three novels behind, and any kind of in-depth analysis of nineteenth-century supernatural fiction with them (and if you'd like to pursue the subject

further, may I recommend H. P. Lovecraft's long essay Supernatural Horror in Literature? It is

available in a cheap but handsome and durable Dover paperback edition.), it might be wise to

backtrack to the beginning and simply offer a tip of the hat to them for the virtues they possess

as novels.

There always has been a tendency to see the popular stories of yesterday as social documents, moral tracts, history lessons, or the precursors of more interesting fictions which

follow (as Polidori's *The Vampyre* foreran *Dracula*, or Lewis's *The Monk*, which in a way sets

the stage for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*)- as anything, in fact, but novels standing on their

own feet, each with its own tale to tell.

When teachers and students turn to the discussion of novels such as *Frankenstein*, *Dr.*

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and *Dracula* upon their own terms-that is, as sustained works of craft

and imagination-the discussion is often all too short. Teachers are more apt to focus on shortcomings, and students more apt to linger on such amusing antiquities as Dr. Seward's phonograph diary, Quincey P. Morris's hideously overdone drawl, or the monster's lucky grab-bag of philosophic literature.

It's true that none of these books approaches the great novels of the same period, and I will not argue that they do; you need only compare two books of roughly the same period-Dracula and Jude the Obscure, let's say-to make the point pretty conclusively. But no novel survives solely on the strength of an idea-nor on its diction or execution, as so many writers and critics of modern literature seem sincerely to believe . . . these salesmen and saleswomen of beautiful cars with no motors. While Dracula is no Jude, Stoker's novel of the Count continues to reverberate in the mind long after the more ghoulish and clamorous Varney the Vampyre has grown silent; the same is true of Mary Shelley's handling of the Thing Without a Name and Robert Louis Stevenson's handling of the Werewolf myth.

What the would-be writer of "serious" fiction (who would relegate plot and story to a place at the end of a long line headed by diction and that smooth flow of language which most

college

writing instructors mistakenly equate with style) seems to forget is that novels are

engines, just

as cars are engines; a Rolls-Royce without an engine might as well be the world's

most

luxurious begonia pot, and a novel in which there is no story becomes nothing but a

curiosity, a

little mental game. Novels are engines, and whatever we might say about these three,

their

creators stoked them with enough invention to run each fast and hot and clean.

Oddly enough, only Stevenson was able to stoke the engine successfully more than

once.

His adventure novels continue to be read, but Stoker's later books, such as *The*

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jewel of Seven

Stars and The Lair of the White Worm, are largely unheard-of and unread except by

the most

rabid fantasy fans.* Mary Shelley's later gothics have similarly fallen into almost

total obscurity.

*In all fairness it must be added that Bram Stoker wrote some absolutely champion

short stories-"*The Squaw*" and

"*The Judge's House*" may be the best known. Those who enjoy macabre short fiction

could not do better than his

collection *Dracula's Guest*, which is stupidly out of print but remains available in

the stacks of most public libraries.

Each of the three novels we've been discussing is remarkable in some way, not just as a horror tale or as a suspense yarn, but as an example of a much wider genre: that of the novel itself.

When Mary Shelley can leave off belaboring the philosophical implications of Victor Frankenstein's work, she gives us several powerful scenes of desolation and grim horror—most notably, perhaps, in the silent polar wastes as this mutual dance of revenge draws to its close.

Of the three, Bram Stoker is perhaps the most energetic. His book may seem overlong to modern readers, and to modern critics who have decided that one should not be expected to devote any more time to a work of popular fiction than one might devote to a made-for-TV movie (the belief seeming to be that the two are interchangeable), but during its course we are rewarded—if that's the right word—with scenes and images worthy of Dore: Renfield spreading his sugar with all the unflagging patience of the damned; the staking of Lucy; the beheading of the weird sisters by Van Helsing; the Count's final end, which comes in a hail of gunfire and a

scary race against darkness.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is a masterpiece of concision-the verdict of Henry James,

not

myself. In that indispensable little handbook by Wilfred Strunk and E. B. White, The

Elements

of Style, the thirteenth rule for good composition reads simply: "Omit needless

words." Along

with Stephen Crane's Red Badge of Courage, Henry James's The Turn of the Screw,

James

M. Cain's The Postman Always Rings Twice and Douglas Fairbairn's Shoot, Stevenson's

economy-sized horror story could serve as a textbook example for young writers on

how

Strunk's Rule 13-the three most important words in all of the textbooks ever written

on the

technique of composition-is best applied. Characterizations are quick but precise;

Stevenson's people are sketched but never caricatured. Mood is implied rather than

belabored.

The narrative is as chopped and lowered as a kid's hot rod.

We'll leave where we picked this up, with the wonder and terror these three great

monsters

continue to create in the minds of readers. The most overlooked facet of each may be

that

each succeeds in overleaping reality and entering a world of total fantasy. But we

are not left

behind in this leap; we are brought along and allowed to view these archetypes of

Werewolf,

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Vampire, and Thing not as figures of myth but as figures of near reality-which is to say, we are

brought along for the ride of our lives. And this, at least, surpasses "good."

Man . . . that's great.

CHAPTER IV

An Annoying Autobiographical Pause

EARLY ON, I mentioned that trying to deal successfully with the phenomenon of terror and

horror as a media/cultural event during the last thirty years would be impossible without a slice

of autobiography. It seems to me that the time to make good on that threat has now arrived.

What a drag. But you're stuck with it, if only because I cannot divorce myself from a field in

which I am mortally involved.

Readers who find themselves inclining toward some genre on a regular basis-western, private-eye stories, drawing-room mysteries, science fiction, or flat-out adventure yarns-seem

rarely to feel the same desire to psychoanalyze their favorite writers' interests (and their own)

as do the readers of horror fiction. Secretly or otherwise, there is the feeling that the taste for

horror fiction is an abnormal one. I wrote a fairly long essay at the beginning of a

book of mine

(Night Shift), trying to analyze some of the reasons why people read horror fiction

and why I

write it. I don't have any interest in reheating that hash here; if you're

interested in pursuing

that subject, I recommend the introduction to you; all my relatives loved it.

The question here is a more esoteric one: Why do people have such an interest in my

interest-and in their own? I believe that, more than anything else, it's because we

all have a

postulate buried deep in our minds: that an interest in horror is unhealthy and

aberrant. So

when people say, "Why do you write that stuff?" they are really inviting me to lie

down on the

couch and explain about the time I was locked in the cellar for three weeks, or my

toilet

training, or possibly some abnormal sibling rivalry. Nobody wants to know if Arthur

Hailey or

Harold Robbins took an unusually long time learning to use the potty, because

writing about

banks and airports and How I Made My First Million are subjects which seem perfectly

normal.

There is something totally American in wanting to know how things work (which goes a

long

way toward explaining the phenomenal success of the Penthouse Forum, I think; what

all

those letters are really discussing is the rocketry of intercourse, the possible trajectories of oral sex and the how-to of various exotic positions-all as American as apple pie; Forum is simply a sexual plumbing manual for the enthusiastic do-it-yourselfer), but something unsettlingly alien about a taste for monsters, haunted houses, and the Thing that Crawled Out of the Crypt at Midnight. Questioners automatically turn into reasonable facsimiles of that amusing comic-strip psychiatrist Victor De Groot, ignoring the fact that making things up for money-which is what any writer of fiction does-is a pretty bizarre way to earn a living.

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In March of 1979, I was invited to be one of three speakers on a panel discussing horror at an event known as the Ides of Mohonk (a onceyearly gathering of mystery writers and fans sponsored by Murder Ink, a nifty mystery-and-detection bookshop in Manhattan). During the course of the panel discussion I told a story that my mother had told me about myself- the event occurred when I was barely four, so perhaps I can be excused for remembering her story of it but not the actual event.

According to Mom, I had gone off to play at a neighbor's house-a house that was near
a
railroad line. About an hour after I left I came back (she said), as white as a
ghost. I would not
speak for the rest of that day; I would not tell her why I'd not waited to be picked
up or phoned
that I wanted to come home; I would not tell her why my chum's mom hadn't walked me
back
but had allowed me to come alone.

It turned out that the kid I had been playing with had been run over by a freight
train while
playing on or crossing the tracks (years later, my mother told me they had picked up
the pieces
in a wicker basket). My mom never knew if I had been near him when it happened, if
it had
occurred before I even arrived, or if I had wandered away after it happened. Perhaps
she had
her own ideas on the subject. But as I've said, I have no memory of the incident at
all; only of
having been told about it some years after the fact.

I told this story in response to a question from the floor. The questioner had
asked, "Can you
recall anything in your childhood that was particularly terrible?"-in other words,
step right in,
Mr. King, the doctor will see you now.

Robert Marasco, author of *Burnt Offerings* and *Parlor Games*, said he could not. I offered

my train story mostly so the questioner wouldn't be totally disappointed, finishing just as I have

here, by saying that I could not actually remember the incident. To which the third panel

member, Janet Jeppson (who is a psychiatrist as well as a novelist), said: "But you've been

writing about it ever since."

There was an approving murmur from the audience. Here was a pigeonhole where I could be filed . . . here was a by-God motive. I wrote *'Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, and destroyed the

world by plague in *The Stand* because I saw this kid run over by a slow freight in the days of

my impressionable youth. I believe this is a totally specious idea such shoot-from-the-hip

psychological judgments are little more than jumped-up astrology.

Not that the past doesn't supply grist for the writer's mill; of course it does. One example: the

most vivid dream I can recall came to me when I was about eight. In this dream I saw the body

of a hanged man dangling from the arm of a scaffold on a hill. Rooks perched on the shoulders

of the corpse, and behind it was a noxious green sky, boiling with clouds. This corpse bore a

sign: ROBERT BURNS. But when the wind caused the corpse to turn in the air, I saw

that it

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was my face rotted and picked by the birds, but obviously mine. And then the corpse opened its

eyes and looked at me. I woke up screaming, sure that that dead face would be leaning over

me in the dark. Sixteen years later, I was able to use the dream as one of the central images in

my novel 'Salem' Lot. I just changed the name of the corpse to Hubie Marsten. In another

dream-this is one which has recurred at times of stress over the last ten years-I am writing a

novel in an old house where a homicidal madwoman is reputed to be on the prowl. I'm working

in a third-floor room that's very hot. A door on the far side of the room communicates with the

attic, and I know-I know-she's in there, and that sooner or later the sound of my typewriter

will cause her to come after me (perhaps she's a critic for the Times Book Review).

At any

rate, she finally comes through the door like a horrid jack from a child's box, all gray hair and

crazed eyes, raving and wielding a meat-ax. And when I run, I discover that somehow the

house has exploded outward- it's gotten ever so much bigger-and I'm totally lost. On
awakening from this dream, I promptly scoot over to my wife's side of the bed.
But we all have our bad dreams, and we all use them as best we can. Yet it is one
thing to
use the dream and quite another to suggest the dream is the cause in and of itself.
That is to
suggest the ridiculous about an interesting subfunction of the human brain that has
little or no
practical application to the real world. Dreams are only mindmovies, the scraps and
remnants
of waking life woven into curious little subconscious quilts by the thrifty human
mind, which is
loath to throw anything out. Some of these mind-movies are of the X-rated variety;
some are
comedies; some are horror movies.

I think that writers are made, not born or created out of dreams or childhood
trauma-that
becoming a writer (or a painter, actor, director, dancer, and so on) is a direct
result of
conscious will. Of course there has to be some talent involved, but talent is a
dreadfully cheap
commodity, cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the
successful
one is a lot of hard work and study; a constant process of honing. Talent is a dull
knife that will
cut nothing unless it is wielded with great force-a force so great that the knife is

not really

cutting at all but bludgeoning and breaking (and after two or three of these

gargantuan swipes

it may succeed in breaking itself . . . which may be what happened to such disparate

writers as

Ross Lockridge and Robert E. Howard). Discipline and constant work are the

whetstones upon

which the dull knife of talent is honed until it becomes sharp enough, hopefully, to

cut through

even the toughest meat and gristle. No writer, painter, or actor-no artist-is ever

handed a

sharp knife (although a few people are handed almighty big ones; the name we give to

the

artist with the big knife is "genius"), and we hone with varying degrees of zeal and

aptitude.

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I'm suggesting that, to be successful, the artist in any field has to be in the

right place at the

right time. The right time is in the lap of the gods, but any mother's son or

daughter can work

his/her way to the right place and wait. *

But what is the right place? That is one of the great, amiable mysteries of human

experience.

I can remember going dowsing as a kid with my Uncle Clayton, a real old Mainer if

one ever

lived. We walked out, my Uncle Clayt and I, he in his red-and-black-checked flannel shirt and

his old green cap, me in my blue parka. I was about twelve; he might have been in his late

forties or his late sixties. He had his dowsing rod under one arm, a wishboneshaped piece of

applewood. Applewood was the best, he said, although birch would do in a pinch.

There was

also maple, but Uncle Clayt's scripture was that maple was the worst of the dowsing woods,

because the grain wasn't true and it would lie if you let it.

At twelve, I was old enough not to believe in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, or dowsing. One

of the odd things about our culture is that many parents seem honor-bound to lay all such

lovely stories to rest in their

*The thought is not original with me, but I'll be damned if I can remember who said it-so let me just credit that

most prolific of writers, Mr. Author Unknown.

children's minds as soon as possible-Dad and Mom may not be able to find time enough to

help their little ones with their homework or to read them a story in the evening

(let them watch

TV instead, TV's a great sitter, lotsa good stories, let 'em watch TV), but they go to great pains

to discredit poor old Santa and such wonders as dowsing and stumpwater-witchcraft.

There's

enough time for that. Somehow such parents find the fairy tales told on Gilligan's

Island, The

Odd Couple, and The Love Boat more acceptable. God knows why so many adults have

confused enlightenment with emotional and imaginal bank robbery, but they have;

they

cannot seem to rest content until the wonder has flickered and died out of their

children's eyes.

(He doesn't mean me, you're whispering to yourself right now-but sir or madam, I

just might.)

Most parents quite rightly recognize the fact that children are mad, in the classic

sense of that

word. But I'm not altogether sure that killing Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy is the

same thing

as "rationality." For children, the rationality of madness seems to work remarkably

well. For

one thing, it keeps the thing in the closet at bay.

Uncle Clayt had lost very little of that sense of wonder. Among his other amazing

talents

(amazing to me, at least) was the ability to line bees-that is, to spot a honeybee

bumbling at a

flower and then follow it back to its hive, tramping through woods, splashing

through bogs,

scrambling over deadfalls-his ability to roll his own cigarettes with one hand

(always giving

them that final eccentric twirl before sticking them into his mouth and lighting

them with

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Diamond matches kept in a small waterproof cannister), and his seemingly endless

fund of lore

and tales . . . Indian stories, ghost stories, family stories, legends, you name it.

On this day my mother had been complaining to Clayt and his wife, Ella, over dinner

about

how slowly the water was drawing in the sinks and the toilet tank. She was afraid

the well was

going dry again. In those days, along about 1959 or 1960, we had a shallow dug well,

and it

went dry every summer for a month or so. Then my brother and I and our cousin hauled

water

in a big old tank that another uncle (Uncle Oren, that one was-for many years the

best damn

carpenter and contractor in southern Maine) had welded together in his workshop. We

would

perch the tank on the tailgate of an old station wagon and then lug it down to the

well in a

relay, using big galvanized-steel milk cans. During that dry month or six weeks we

drew our

drinking water from the town pump.

So Uncle Clayt grabbed me while the women were washing up and told me we were going

to dowse my mother a new well. At twelve, it was an interesting enough way to spend
some
time, but I was skeptical; Uncle Clayt might as well have told me he was going to
show me
where a flying saucer had landed behind the Methodist meeting hall.
He walked around, green cap tilted back on his head, one of his Bugler cigarettes
jutting
from the corner of his mouth, applewood stick held in both hands. He held it by the
wishbone,
wrists rotated outward, his big thumbs pressed firmly against the wood. We walked
aimlessly
around the back yard, the driveway, the hill, where the apple tree stood (and still
stands today,
although new people live in that little five-room house). And Clayt talked . . .
stories about
baseball, about an attempt to form a copper-mining concern once upon a time in
Kittery, of all
places, about how Paul Bunyan was supposed to have turned the course of the Prestile
Stream once upon a time to provide water for the logging camps.
And every now and then he would pause, and the rod of that applewood dowser would
tremble just a little. He would pause in his story and wait. The trembling might
increase to a
steady vibration, and then fade out. "You got somethin there, Stevie," he'd say.
"Somethin. Not
too much." And I would nod wisely, convinced he was doing it all himself. Like the

way it's
parents, not Santa Claus, who put the presents under the tree, don't you know, or
the way they
take away the tooth under your pillow after you're asleep and replace it with a
dime. But I went
along with him. I came from an age of children who wanted to be good, remember; we
were
taught to "speak when spoken to," and to humor their elders no matter how nutty
their ideas
might be. This is not a bad way of initiating children into the more exotic realms
of human
behavior and human belief, by the way; the quiet child (and I was one) is often
given walking
tours through some extremely bizarre tracts of mental countryside. I did not believe
it possible
to dowse water with an applewood stick, but I was quite interested in seeing how the
trick

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would be performed.

We walked around onto the front lawn, and the stick began to tremble again. Uncle
Clayt

brightened. "We got the real thing here," he said. "Look at this, Stevie! She's
gonna dive, be
damned if she ain't!"

Three steps further along, the applewood rod dove-it simply revolved in Uncle

Clayt's hands

and pointed straight down. It was a good trick, all right; I could actually hear the tendons in his

wrists creak, and there was some strain on his face as he forced the straight part of the

wishbone-shaped stick skyward again. As soon as he released the pressure, the stick whipped

down at the ground again.

"Got plenty of water here," he said. "You could drink it until judgment Day and it'd still run.

It's close, too."

"Let me try it," I said.

"Well, you got to back off a little first," he said, and we did. We went back to the edge of the driveway.

He gave me the stick, showed me how to hold it with my thumbs cocked just so (wrists outward, thumbs pointing down-"Otherwise, that son of a whore is gonna break your wrists

tryin to point when you get over that water," Clayt said), and then he gave me a little push on the ass.

"It don't feel like nothin' but a piece of wood right now, does it?" he asked.

I agreed that this was so.

"But when you start gettin' close to that water, you're gonna feel her come alive," he said. "I

mean really alive, like it was still on the tree. Oh, applewood's good for dousing.

Nothing beats

applewood when you're huntin' wellwater."

So some of what happened could well have been suggestion, and I'm not trying to convince

you otherwise, although I've read enough since then to believe that dowsing really does work,

at least at some times and for some people and for some crazy reason of its own. * I will say

that Uncle Clayt had lulled me into that same state that I have tried again and again to lull the

readers of my stories into-that state of believability where the ossified shield of "rationality" has

been temporarily laid aside, the suspension of disbelief is at hand, and the sense of wonder is

again within reach. And if that's the power of suggestion, it seems okay to me; better than

cocaine for the brain.

I started walking toward the spot where Uncle Clayt had been when the rod dove, and I'll be

damned if that applewood stick didn't seem to come alive in my hands. It got warm, and it

began to move. At first it was a vibration that I could feel but not see, and then the tip of the rod

began to jiggle around.

"It's working!" I screamed at Uncle Clayt. "I can feel it!"

Clayt got laughing. I got laughing, too-not a hysterical sort of laughter, but one of pure and

utter delight. When I got over the spot

*One of the more plausible explanations of the phenomenon is that the stick doesn't

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dowse the water; the

person holding the stick does, and then imputes the ability to the stick. Horses can

smell water twelve miles away

if the wind is right; why should not a person be able to sense water fifty or a

hundred feet underground?

where the dowsing rod dove for Uncle Clayt, it dove for me; at one moment it was

upright, and

at the next it was pointing straight down. I can remember two things very clearly

about that

moment. One was a sensation of weight-how heavy that wooden wishbone had become. It

seemed I could barely hold it up. It was as if the water was inside the stick

instead of in the

ground; as if it were fairly bloated with water. Clayt had brought the stick up to

its original

position after it dove. I could not. He took it out of my hands, and as he did I

felt the sensation

of weight and magnetism break. It did not pass from me to him; it broke. It was

there at one

moment and at the next it was gone.

The other thing I remember is a combined feeling of certainty and mystery. The water was there. Uncle Clayt knew it and I knew it, too. It was down there in the earth, a river caught in rock, for all we knew. It was that feeling of having come to the right place. There are lines of power in the world, you know-invisible but thrumming with a tremendous, scary load of energy. Every now and then someone will stumble over one and get fried, or grasp one in the right way and set it to work. But you have to find one.

Clayt drove a stake into the ground where we had felt the pull of the water. The well did indeed go dry-in July instead of August, as a matter of fact-and as there was no money for a new well that year, the water tank made its yearly summer appearance on the tailgate of the station wagon, and my brother, my cousin, and I made our round trips down to the old well with the milk cans of water again. We did the same the following summer. But around 1963 or '64, we had the artesian well drilled.

By then the stake Clayt had driven was long gone, but I remembered its location well enough. The well-drillers located their rig, that big red gadget that looked so much like some child's Erector Set vision of a praying mantis, within three feet of where the stake

had been

(and in my mind now I can still hear Mom moaning about the wet clay that was spewed

all over

our front lawn). They had to go down less than a hundred feet-and as Clayt had said

on that

Sunday when he and I walked out with the applewood rod, there was plenty of water.

We could

have drunk it until judgment Day and it still would have kept running.

2

I'm working my way back to the main point, this main point being why it is useless

to ask any

writer what he writes about. You might as well ask the rose why it is red. Talent,

like the water

Uncle Clayt doused out under our lawn after dinner one Sunday afternoon, is there

all alongexcept,

instead of water, it's more like a big rude lump of ore. It can be

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refined-or honed, to

return to an earlier image-and it can be set to work in an infinite number of ways.

The honing

and the setting-to-work are simple operations, completely under the control of the

fledgling

writer. Refining talent is merely a matter of exercise. If you work out with weights

for fifteen

minutes a day over a course of ten years, you're gonna get muscles. If you write for an hour

and a half a day for ten years, you're gonna turn into a good writer. *

But what's down there? That's the one great variable, the wild card in the deck. I don't think

the writer has any control over that. When you drill a well and get the water, you send a

sample to your state's Water Testing Agency and get back a readout-and the mineral content

can vary amazingly. All H₂O is not created equal. Similarly, while Joyce Carol Oates and

Harold Robbins are both writing English, they are really not writing the same language at all.

There is a certain fascination inherent in the discovery of talent (although it is a difficult thing

to write well about, and something I will not attempt at all-"Leave it to the poets!" he cried.

"The poets know how to talk about that, or at least they think they do, and it comes to the

same; so leave it to the poets!"), that magical moment when the dowsing rod turns downward

and you know that it is here, right here. There's also a certain fascination in the actual drilling

of the well, refining the ore, honing the knife (also a difficult thing to write well about; one saga

of the Heroic Struggle of the Young and Virile Writer that has always struck me well

is Herman

Wouk's Youngblood Hawke), but what I really want to spend a couple of minutes

talking about

is another kind of dousing-not the actual discovery of talent, but that lightning

stroke which

occurs when you discover not talent itself, but the particular direction in which

that talent will

incline. It is the moment, if you will, when a Little Leaguer discovers, not that he

or she can

pitch (which he/she may have know for some time), but that she or he has a

particular ability to

throw the good live fastball or to pop a curve that rises

*But, I hasten to add, only if you have the talent there to begin with. You can

spend ten years refining common

earth and come out at the end with nothing but common earth, sifted fine. I have

been playing guitar since the age

of fourteen, and at the age of thirty-three I've not progressed much beyond where I

was at sixteen, playing "Louie,

Louie" and "Little Deuce Coupe" on rhythm guitar with a group called the

MoonSpinners. I can play a little, and it

sure cheers me up when I've got the blues, but I think Eric Clapton is still safe.

or dips outrageously. This is also a particularly fine moment. And all of this, I

hope, will justify

the bit of autobiography that follows. It doesn't try to explain my own interest in

the danse

macabre, or justify it, or psychoanalyze it; it only tries to set the stage for an interest that has

proved to be lifelong, profitable, and pleasant . . . except, of course, when the

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madwoman

pops out of her attic in that unpleasant dreamhouse in which my subconscious places

me

every four months or so.

3

My mother's people were named Pillsbury, and came originally (or so she said) from the

same family that produced the Pillsburys who now make cake mixes and flour. The difference

between the two branches of the family, Mom said, was that the flour-Pillsburys moved west to

make their fortune, while our people stayed shirttail but honest on the coast of Maine. My

grandmother, Nellie Pillsbury (nee Fogg), was one of the first women ever to graduate from

Gorham Normal School-the class of '02, I think. She died at age eighty-five, blind and

bedridden, but still able to decline Latin verbs and name all of the Presidents up to Truman. My

maternal grandfather was a carpenter and, for a brief time, Winslow Homer's handyman.

My father's people came from Peru, Indiana, and much further back, from Ireland. The Pillsburys, of good Anglo-Saxon stock, were levelheaded and practical. My father apparently came from a long line of eccentrics; his sister, my Aunt Betty, had mental fugues (my mother believed her to be a manic-depressive, but then, Mom never would have run for president of the Aunt Betty Fan Club), my paternal grandmother enjoyed frying half a loaf of bread in bacon fat for breakfast, and my paternal grandfather, who stood six feet six and weighed a cool three hundred and fifty pounds, dropped dead at the age of thirty-two while running to catch a train.

Or so the story goes.

I've been saying that it's impossible to tell why one particular area strikes the mind with all the peculiar force of obsession, but that it's very possible to pinpoint that moment when the interest was discovered-the moment, if you will, when the dowsing rod turns suddenly and emphatically down toward hidden water. Put another way, talent is only a compass, and we'll not discuss why it points toward magnetic north; instead we'll treat briefly of that moment when the needle actually swings toward that great point of attraction.

It has always seemed peculiar to me that I owe that moment in my own life to my father, who left my mother when I was two and my brother, David, four. I don't remember him at all, but in the few pictures of him I've seen, he is a man of average height, handsome in a 1940s sort of way, a bit podgy, bespectacled. He was a merchant mariner during World War II, crossing the North Atlantic and playing German roulette with the U-boats. His worst fear, my mother said, was not of the submarines but of having his master's license revoked because of his poor eyesight-while on land, he had a habit of driving over curbs and through stoplights.

My own eyesight is similar; they look like glasses, but sometimes I think they're a

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couple of

Coke-bottle bottoms up there on my face.

Don King was a man with an itchy foot. My brother was born in 1945, I was born in 1947,

and in 1949 my father was seen no more . . . although in 1964, during the troubles in the

Congo, my mother insisted that she had seen him in a newsclip of white mercenaries fighting

for one side or the other. I suppose it is just barely possible. By then he would

have been in his

late forties or early fifties. If it was so, I sure hope he had his lenses corrected

in the interim.

After my father took off, my mother landed on her feet, scrambling. My brother and I

didn't

see a great deal of her over the next nine years. She worked at a succession of

low-paying

jobs: presser in a laundry, doughnut-maker on the night shift at a bakery, store

clerk,

housekeeper. She was a talented pianist and a woman with a great and sometimes

eccentric

sense of humor, and somehow she kept things together, as women before her have done

and

as other women are doing even now as we speak. We never had a car (nor a TV set

until

1956), but we never missed any meals.

We hopscotched our way across the country during those nine years, always returning

to

New England. In 1958 we returned to Maine for good. My grandfather and grandmother

were

into their eighties, and the family hired my mother to care for them in their

declining years.

This was in Durham, Maine, and while all these family ramblings may seem far from

the

point, we're getting near to it now. About a quarter of a mile away from the small

house in

Durham where my brother and I finished our growing up, there was a lovely brick

house where

my mother's sister, Ethelyn Pillsbury Flaws, and her husband, Oren, lived. Over the

Flaws's

garage was a lovely, long attic room with loose, rumbling boards and that entrancing

attic

smell.

At that time the attic connected with a whole complex of outbuildings, which in turn

finally led

to a great old barn-all of these buildings smelling intoxicatingly of sweet hay long

departed.

But there was a reminder of the days when animals had been kept in the barn. If one

climbed

to the third loft, one could observe the skeletons of several chickens that had

apparently died

of some strange disease up there. It was a pilgrimage I made often; there was

something

fascinating about those chicken skeletons, lying in a drift of feathers as ephemeral

as

moondust, some secret in the black sockets where their eyes had once been

But the attic over the garage was a kind of family museum. Everyone on the Pillsbury

side of

the family had stored things up there from time to time, from furniture to

photographs, and

there was just room for a small boy to twist and turn his way along narrow aisles,

ducking

under the arm of a standing lamp or stepping over a crate of old wallpaper samples

that

someone had wanted saved for some forgotten reason.

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My brother and I were not actually forbidden the attic, but my Aunt Ethelyn frowned

on our

visits up there because the floorboards had only been laid, not nailed, and some

were missing.

It would have been easy enough, I suppose, to trip and go headfirst through a hole

and down

to the concrete floor below-or into the bed of my Uncle Oren's green Chevy pickup

truck.

For me, on a cold fall day in 1959 or 1960, the attic over my aunt and uncle's

garage was

the place where that interior dowsing rod suddenly turned over, where the compass

needle

swung emphatically toward some mental true north. That was the day I happened to

come on

a box of my father's books . . . paperbacks from the mid-forties.

There was a lot of my mother and father's married life in the attic, and I can

understand how,

in the wake of his sudden disappearance from her life, she would want to take as

many of his

things as possible and put them away in a dark place. It was there, a year or two earlier, that my brother found a reel of movie film my father had taken on shipboard. Dave and I pooled some money we had saved (without my mother's knowledge) , rented a movie projector, and watched it over and over again in fascinated silence. My father turned the camera over to someone else at one point and there he is, Donald King of Peru, Indiana, standing against the rail. He raises his hand; smiles; unknowingly waves to sons who were then not even conceived. We rewind it, watched it, rewind it, watched it again. And again. Hi, Dad; wonder where you are now.

In another box there were piles of his merchant marine manuals; in another, scrapbooks of stuff from foreign countries. My mother told me that while he would go around with a paperback western stuffed into his back pocket, his real interest was in science fiction and horror stories. He tried his own hand at a number of tales of this type, submitting them to the popular men's magazines of the day, Bluebook and Argosy among them. He ultimately published nothing ("Your father didn't have a great deal of stick-to-it in his nature," my mother once told me dryly, and that was about as close as she ever came to ranking him out) , but he

did get several personal rejection notes; "This-won't-do-but-send-us-more" notes I used to call them in my teens and early twenties, when I collected a good many of my own (during periods of depression I would sometimes wonder what it would be like to blow your nose on a rejection slip).

The box I found that day was a treasure trove of old Avon paperbacks. Avon, in those days, was the one paperback publisher committed to fantasy and weird fiction. I remember those books with great affection-particularly the shiny overcoating which all Avons bore, a material that was a cross between isinglass and Saran Wrap. When and if the story lagged, you could peel this shiny stuff off the cover in long strips. It made a perfectly wonderful noise. And

although it wanders from the subject, I also remember the forties Dell paperbacks

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with lovethy

were all mysteries back then, and on the back of each was a luxurious map

showing the

scene of the crime.

One of those books was an Avon "sampler"-the word anthology was apparently

considered

too esoteric for readers of this sort of material to grasp. It contained stories by

Frank Belknap

Long ("The Hounds of Tindalos"), Zelia Bishop ("The Curse of Yig"), and a host of

other tales

culled from the early days of *Weird Tales* magazine. Two of the others were novels by

A.

Merritt-Burn, *Witch, Burn* (not to be confused with the later Fritz Leiber novel,

Conjure Wife)

and *The Metal Monster*.

The pick of the litter, however, was an H. P. Lovecraft collection. I am no longer

sure of the

title, but I remember the picture on the cover very well: a cemetery (somewhere near

Providence, one assumes!) at night, and coming out from beneath a tombstone, a

loathsome

green thing with long fangs and burning red eyes. Behind it, suggested but not

graphically

drawn, was a tunnel leading down into the bowels of the earth. Since then I've seen

literally

hundreds of editions of Lovecraft, yet that remains the one which best sums up

H.P.L.'s work

for me . . . and I've no idea who the artist might have been.

That box of books wasn't my first encounter with horror, of course. I think that in

America

you would have to be blind and deaf not to have come in contact with at least one

creature or

boogey by the age of ten or twelve. But it was my first encounter with serious fantasy-horror fiction. Lovecraft has been called a hack, a description I would dispute vigorously, but whether he was or wasn't, and whether he was a writer of popular fiction or a writer of so-called "literary fiction" (depending on your critical bent), really doesn't matter very much in this context, because either way, the man himself took his work seriously. And it showed. So that book, courtesy of my departed father, was my first taste of a world that went deeper than the B-pictures which played at the movies on Saturday afternoon or the boys' fiction of Carl Carner and Roy Rockwell. When Lovecraft wrote "The Rats in the Walls" and "Pickman's Model," he wasn't simply kidding around or trying to pick up a few extra bucks; he meant it, and it was his seriousness as much as anything else which that interior dowsing rod responded to, I think.

I took the books out of the attic with me. My aunt, who was a grammar school teacher and the soul of practicality down to her shoes, disapproved of them strenuously, but I held onto them. That day and the next, I visited the Plains of Leng for the first time; made my first

acquaintance with that quaint pre-OPEC Arab, Abdul Alhazred (author of The Necronomicon, which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been offered to members of the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Literary Guild, although a copy was reputed to have been kept for years under lock and key in the Special Collections vault at Miskatonic University); visited

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danse macabre Stephen King the towns of Dunwich and Arkham, Massachusetts; and was, most of all, transported by the bleak and creeping terror of "The Colour Out of Space."

A week or two later all of those books disappeared, and I never saw them again. I've always

suspected that my Aunt Ethelyn might have been an unindicted co-conspirator in that case . . .

not that it mattered in the long run. I was on my way. Lovecraft-courtesy of my father opened

the way for me, as he had done for others before me: Robert Bloch, Clark Ashton

Smith, Frank Belknap Long, Fritz Leiber, and Ray Bradbury among them. And while Lovecraft,

who died before the Second World War could fulfill many of his visions of unimaginable horror,

does not figure largely in this book, the reader would do well to remember that it is his shadow,

so long and gaunt, and his eyes, so dark and puritanical, which overlie almost all
of the

important horror fiction that has come since. It is his eyes I remember best from
the first

photograph of him I ever saw . . . eyes like those in the old portraits which still
hang in many

New England houses, black eyes which seem to look inward as well as outward.
Eyes that seem to follow you.

4

The first movie I can remember seeing as a kid was Creature from the Black Lagoon.

It was

at the drive-in, and unless it was a second-run job I must have been about seven,
because the

film, which starred Richard Carlson and Richard Denning, was released in 1954. It
was also

originally released in 3-D, but I cannot remember wearing the glasses, so perhaps I
did see a

rerelease.

I remember only one scene clearly from the movie, but it left a lasting impression.

The hero

(Carlson) and the heroine (Julia Adams, who looked absolutely spectacular in a
one-piece

white bathing suit) are on an expedition somewhere in the Amazon basin. They make
their way

up a swampy, narrow waterway and into a wide pond that seems an idyllic South

American

version of the Garden of Eden.

But the creature is lurking-naturally. It's a scaly, batrachian monster that is remarkably like

Lovecraft's half-breed, degenerate aberrations-the crazed and blasphemous results of liaisons between gods and human women (I told you it's difficult to get away from Lovecraft).

This monster is slowly and patiently barricading the mouth of the stream with sticks and

branches, irrevocably sealing the party of anthropologists in.

I was barely old enough to read at that time, the discovery of my father's box of weird fiction

still years away. I have a vague memory of boyfriends in my mom's life during that periodfrom

1952 until 1958 or so; enough of a memory to be sure she had a social life, not enough to

even guess if she had a sex life. There was Norville, who smoked Luckies and kept three fans

going in his two-room apartment during the summer; and there was Milt, who drove a Buick

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and wore gigantic blue shorts in the summertime; and another fellow, very small, who was, I

believe, a cook in a French restaurant. So far as I know, my mother came close to marrying

none of them. She'd gone that route once. Also, that was a time when a woman, once married, became a shadow figure in the process of decision-making and bread-winning. I think my mom, who could be stubborn, intractable, grimly persevering and nearly impossible to discourage, had gotten a taste for captaining her own life. And so she went out with guys, but none of them became permanent fixtures.

It was Milt we were out with that night, he of the Buick and the large blue shorts. He seemed to genuinely like my brother and me, and to genuinely not mind having us along in the back seat from time to time (it may be that when you have reached the calmer waters of your early forties, the idea of necking at the drive-in no longer appeals so strongly . . . even if you have a Buick as large as a cabin cruiser to do it in). By the time the Creature made his appearance, my brother had slithered down onto the floor of the back and had fallen asleep. My mother and Milt were talking, perhaps passing a Kool back and forth. They don't matter, at least not in this context; nothing matters except the big black-and-white images up on the screen, where the unspeakable Thing is walling the handsome hero and the sexy heroine into . . . into

. . . the

Black Lagoon!

I knew, watching, that the Creature had become my Creature; I had bought it. Even to

a

seven-year-old, it was not a terribly convincing Creature. I did not know then it

was good old

Ricou Browning, the famed underwater stuntman, in a molded latex suit, but I surely

knew it

was some guy in some kind of a monster suit . . . just as I knew that, later on that

night, lie

would visit me in the black lagoon of my dreams, looking much more realistic. He

might be

waiting in the closet when we got back; he might be standing slumped in the

blackness of the

bathroom at the end of the hall, stinking of algae and swamp rot, all ready for a

post-midnight

snack of small boy. Seven isn't old, but it is old enough to know that you get what

you pay for.

You own it, you bought it, it's yours. It is old enough to feel the dowser suddenly

come alive,

grow heavy, and roll over in your hands, pointing at hidden water.

My reaction to the Creature on that night was perhaps the perfect reaction, the one

every

writer of horror fiction or director who has worked in the field hopes for when he

or she uncaps

a pen or a lens: total emotional involvement, pretty much undiluted by any real

thinking

process-and you understand, don't you, that when it comes to horror movies, the only

thought

process really necessary to break the mood is for a friend to lean over and whisper,

"See the

zipper running down his back?"

I think that only people who have worked in the field for some time truly understand

how

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fragile this stuff really is, and what an amazing commitment it imposes on the

reader or viewer

of intellect and maturity. When Coleridge spoke of "the suspension of disbelief" in

his essay on

imaginative poetry, I believe he knew that disbelief is not like a balloon, which

may be

suspended in air with a minimum of effort; it is like a lead weight, which has to be

hoisted with

a clean and a jerk and held up by main force. Disbelief isn't light; it's heavy. The

difference in

sales between Arthur Hailey and H. P. Lovecraft may exist because everyone believes

in cars

and banks, but it takes a sophisticated and muscular intellectual act to believe,

even for a little

while, in Nyarlathotep, the Blind Faceless One, the Howler in the Night. And

whenever I run
into someone who expresses a feeling along the lines of, "I don't read fantasy or go
to any of
those movies; none of it's real," I feel a kind of sympathy. They simply can't lift
the weight of
fantasy. The muscles of the imagination have grown too weak.
In this sense, kids are the perfect audience for horror. The paradox is this:
children, who are
physically quite weak, lift the weight of unbelief with ease. They are the jugglers
of the invisible
world-a perfectly understandable phenomenon when you consider the perspective they
must
view things from. Children deftly manipulate the logistics of Santa Claus's entry on
Christmas
Eve (lie can get down small chimneys by making himself small, and if there's no
chimney
there's the letter slot, and if there's no letter slot there's always the crack
under the door), the
Easter Bunny, God (big guy, sorta old, white beard, throne), Jesus ("How do you
think lie
turned the water into wine?" I asked my son Joe when he-Joe, not Jesus-was five;
Joe's
idea was that he lead something "kinda like magic Kool-Aid, you get what I mean?"),
the devil
(big guy, red skin, horse feet, tail with an arrow on the end of it, Snidely
Whiplash moustache),

Ronald McDonald, the Burger King, the Keebler Elves, Dorothy and Toto, the Lone Ranger

and Tonto, a thousand more.

Most parents think they understand this openness better than, in many cases, they actually

do, and try to keep their children away from anything that smacks too much of horror and

terror-"Rated PG (or G in the case of *The Andromeda Strain*), but may be too intense for

younger children," the ads for *Jaws* read-believing, I suppose, that to allow their kids to go to

a real horror movie would be tantamount to rolling a live hand grenade into a nursery school.

But one of the odd Doppler effects that seems to occur during the selective forgetting that is

so much a part of "growing up" is the fact that almost everything has a scare potential. for the

child under eight. Children are literally afraid of their own shadows at the right time and place.

There is the story of the four-year-old who refused to go to bed at night without a light on in his

closet. His parents at last discovered he was frightened of a creature he had heard

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his father

speak of often; this creature, which had grown large and dreadful in the child's imagination,

was the "twi-night double-header."

Seen in this light, even Disney movies are minefields of terror, and the animated caroons,

which will apparently be released and rereleased even unto the end of the world, * are usually

the worst offenders. There are adults today, who, when questioned, will tell you that the most

frightening thing they saw at the movies as children was Bambi's father shot by the hunter, or

Bambi and his mother running before the forest fire. Other Disney memories which are right up

there with the batrachian horror inhabiting the Black Lagoon include the marching brooms that

have gone totally out of control in Fantasia (and for the small child, the real horror inherent in

the situation is probably buried in the implied father-son relationship between Mickey Mouse

and the old sorcerer; those brooms are making a terrible mess, and when the sorcerer/ father

gets home, there may be PUNISHMENT This sequence might well send the child of strict

parents into an ecstasy of terror) ; the night on Bald Mountain from the same film; the witches

in Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, one with her enticingly red poisoned apple (and

what

small child is not taught early to fear the idea of POISON?), the other with her

deadly spinning

wheel; this holds all the way up to the relatively innocuous One Hundred and One

Dalmatians,

which features the logical granddaughter of those Disney witches from the thirties

and

forties-the evil Cruella DeVille, with her scrawny, nasty face, her loud voice

(grownups

sometimes forget how terrified young children are of loud voices, which come from

the giants

of their world, the adults), and her plan to kill all the dalmatian puppies (read

"children," if

you're a little person) and turn them into dogskin coats.

Yet it is the parents, of course, who continue to underwrite the Disney procedure of

release

and rerelease, often discovering goosebumps on their own arms as they rediscover

what

terrified them as children . . . because what the good horror film (or horror

sequence in what

may be billed a "comedy" or an "animated cartoon") does above all else is to knock

the adult

props out from under us and tumble us back down the slide into childhood. And there

our own

shadow may once again become that of a mean dog, a gaping mouth, or a beckoning dark

figure.

*In one of my favorite Arthur C. Clarke stories, this actually happens. In this vignette, aliens from space land on earth after the Big One has finally gone down. As the story closes, the best brains of this alien culture are trying to figure out the meaning of a film they have found and learned how to play back. The film ends with the words A Walt Disney Production. I have moments when I really believe that there would be no better epitaph for the human race, or for a world where the only sentient being absolutely guaranteed of immortality is not Hitler,

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danse macabre Stephen King Charlemagne, Albert Schweitzer, or even Jesus Christ-but is, instead, Richard M. Nixon, whose name is engraved on a plaque placed on the airless surface of the moon. Perhaps the supreme realization of this return to childhood comes in David Cronenberg's marvelous horror film The Brood, where a disturbed woman is literally producing "children of rage" who go out and murder the members of her family, one by one. About halfway through the film, her father sits dispiritedly on the bed in an upstairs room, drinking and mourning his wife, who has been the first to feel the wrath of the brood. We cut to the bed itself . . . and

clawed hands suddenly reach out from beneath it and dig into the carpeting near the doomed father's shoes. And so Cronenberg pushes us down the slide; we are four again, and all of our worst surmises about what might be lurking under the bed have turned out to be true. The irony of all this is that children are better able to deal with fantasy and terror on its own terms than their elders are. You'll note I've italicized the phrase "on its own terms." An adult is able to deal with the cataclysmic terror of something like The Texa Chainsaw Massacre because he or she understands that it is all make-believe, and that when the take is done the dead people will simply get up and wash off the stage blood. The child is not so able to make this distinction, and Chainsaw Massacre is quite rightly rated R. Little kids do not need this scene, any more than they need the one at the end of The Fury where John Cassavetes quite literally blows apart. But the point is, if you put a little kid of six in the front row at a screening of The Texa Chainsaw Massacre along with an adult who was temporarily unable to distinguish between make-believe and "real things" (as Danny Torrance, the little boy in The Shining puts

it)-if, for instance, you had given the adult a hit of Yellow Sunshine LSD about two hours

before the movie started-my guess is that the kid would have maybe a week's worth of bad

dreams. The adult might spend a year or so in a rubber room, writing home with Crayolas.

A certain amount of fantasy and horror in a child's life seems to me a perfectly okay, useful

sort of thing. Because of the size of their imaginative capacity, children are able to handle it,

and because of their unique position in life, they are able to put such feelings to work. They

understand their position very well, too. Even in such a relatively ordered society as our own,

they understand that their survival is a matter almost totally out of their hands.

Children are

"dependents" up until the age of eight or so in every sense of the word; dependent on mother

and father (or some reasonable facsimile thereof) not only for food, clothing, and shelter, but

dependent on them not to crash the car into a bridge abutment, to meet the school bus on

time, to walk them home from Cub Scouts or Brownies, to buy medicines with childproof caps,

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dependent on them to make sure they don't electrocute themselves while screwing around with the toaster or while trying to play with Barbie's Beauty Salon in the bathtub. Running directly counter to this necessary dependence is the survival directive built into all of us. The child realizes his or her essential lack of control, and I suspect it is this very realization which makes the child uneasy. It is the same sort of free-floating anxiety that many air travelers feel. They are not afraid because they believe air travel to be unsafe; they are afraid because they have surrendered control, and if something goes wrong all they can do is sit there clutching air-sick bags or the inflight magazine. To surrender control runs counter to the survival directive. Conversely, while a thinking, informed person may understand intellectually that travel by car is much more dangerous than flying, he or she is still apt to feel much more comfortable behind the wheel, because she/he has control . . . or at least an illusion of it. This hidden hostility and anxiety toward the airline pilots of their lives may be one explanation why, like the Disney pictures which are released during school vacations in

perpetuity, the old fairy tales also seem to go on forever. A parent who would raise his or her hands in horror at the thought of taking his/her child to see Dracula or The Changeling (with its pervasive imagery of the drowning child) would be unlikely to object to the baby sitter reading "Hansel and Gretel" to the child before bedtime. But consider: the tale of Hansel and Gretel begins with deliberate abandonment (oh yes, the stepmother masterminds that one, but she is the symbolic mother all the same, and the father is a spaghetti-brained nurd who goes along with everything she suggests even though he know it's wrong-thus we can see her as amoral, him as actively evil in the Biblical and Miltonian sense), it progresses to kidnapping (the witch in the candy house), enslavement, illegal detention, and finally justifiable homicide and cremation. Most mothers and fathers would never take their children to see Survive, that quickly Mexican exploitation flick about the rugby players who survived the aftermath of a plane crash in the Andes by eating their dead teammates, but these same parents find little to object to in "Hansel and Gretel," where the witch is fattening the children up so she can eat

them. We give this stuff to the kids almost instinctively, understanding on a deeper level, perhaps, that such fairy stories are the perfect points of crystallization for those fears and hostilities.

Even anxiety-ridden air travelers have their own fairy tales-all those Airport movies, which, like "Hansel and Gretel" and all those Disney cartoons, show every sign of going on forever . . .

but which should only be viewed on Thanksgivings, since all of them feature a large cast of turkeys.

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My gut reaction to Creature from the Black Lagoon on that long-ago night was a kind of

terrible, waking swoon. The nightmare was happening right in front of me; every hideous

possibility that human flesh is heir to was being played out on that drive-in screen.

Approximately twenty-two years later, I had a chance to see Creature from the Black Lagoon again-not on TV, with any kind of dramatic build and mood broken up by adverts for

used cars, K-Tel disco anthologies, and Underalls pantyhose, thank God, but intact, uncut . . .

and even in 3-D. Guys like me who wear glasses have a hell of a time with 3-D, you know; ask

anyone who wears specs how they like those nifty little cardboard glasses they give you when

you walk in the door. If 3-D ever comes back in a big way, I'm going to take myself down to the

local Pearle Vision Center and invest seventy bucks in a special pair of prescription lenses:

one red, one blue. Annoying glasses aside, I should add that I took my son Joe with me-he

was then five, about the age I had been myself, that night at the drive-in (and imagine my

surprise-my rueful surprise-to discover that the movie which had so terrified me on that

long-ago night had been rated G by the MPAA . . . just like the Disney pictures).

As a result, I had a chance to experience that weird doubling back in time that I believe most

parents only experience at the Disney films with their children, or when reading them the Pooh

books or perhaps taking them to the Shrine or the Barnum & Bailey circus. A popular record is

apt to create a particular "set" in a listener's mind, precisely because of its brief life of six

weeks to three months, and "golden oldies" continue to be played because they are the

emotional equivalent of freeze-dried coffee. When the Beach Boys come on the radio

singing

"Help Me, Rhonda," there is always that wonderful second or two when I can reexperience the wonderful, guilty joy of copping my first feel (and if you do the mental subtraction from my present age of thirty-three, you'll see that I was a little backward in that respect). Movies and books do the same thing, although I would argue that the mental set, its depth and texture, tends to be a little richer, a little more complex, when reexperiencing films, and a lot more complex when dealing with books.

With Joe that day I experienced Creature from the Black Lagoon from the other end of the telescope, but this particular theory of set identification still applied; in fact, it prevailed. Time and age and experience have all left their marks on me, just as they have on you; time is not a river, as Einstein theorized-it's a big fucking buffalo herd that runs us down and eventually mashes us into the ground, dead and bleeding, with a hearing-aid plugged into one ear and a colostomy bag instead of a .44 clapped on one leg. Twenty-two years later I knew that the Creature was really good old Ricou Browning, the famed underwater stuntman, in a

molded

latex suit, and the suspension of disbelief, that mental clean-and-jerk, had become

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a lot harder

to accomplish. But I did it, which may mean nothing, or which may mean (I hope!)

that the

buffalo haven't got me yet. But when that weight of disbelief was finally up there,

the old

feelings came flooding in, as they flooded in some five years ago when I took Joe

and my

daughter Naomi to their first movie, a reissue of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

There is

a scene in that film where, after Snow White has taken a bite from the poisoned

apple, the

dwarves take her into the forest, weeping copiously. Half the audience of little

kids was also in

tears; the lower lips of the other half were trembling. The set identification in

that case was

strong enough so that I was also surprised into tears. I hated myself for being so

blatantly

manipulated, but manipulated I was, and there I sat, blubbering into my beard over a

bunch of

cartoon characters. But it wasn't Disney that manipulated me; I did it myself. It

was the kid

inside who wept, surprised out of dormancy and into schmaltzy tears . . . but at

least awake for

awhile.

During the final two reels of Creature from the Black Lagoon, the weight of

disbelief is nicely

balanced somewhere above my head, and once again director Jack Arnold places the

symbols

in front of me and produces the old equation of the fairy tales, each symbol as big

and as easy

to handle as a child's alphabet block. Watching, the child awakes again and knows

that this is

what dying is like. Dying is when the Creature from the Black Lagoon dams up the

exit. Dying

is when the monster gets you.

In the end, of course, the hero and heroine, very much alive, not only survive but

triumphas

Hansel and Gretel do. As the drive-in floodlights over the screen came on and the

projector

flashed its GOOD NIGHT, DRIVE SAFELY slide on that big white space (along with the

virtuous suggestion that you ATTEND THE CHURCH OF YOUR CHOICE), there was a brief

feeling of relief, almost of resurrection. But the feeling that stuck longest was

the swooning

sensation that good old Richard Carlson and good old Julia Adams were surely going

down for

the third time, and the image that remains forever after is of the creature slowly

and patiently

walling its victims into the Black Lagoon; even now I can see it peering over that
growing wall
of mud and sticks.

Its eyes. Its ancient eyes.

CHAPTER V

Radio and the Set of Reality

BOOKS AND MOVIES are all very well, and we'll come back to them before long, but
before

we do I'd like to talk a little about radio in the mid-fifties. I'll start with

myself, and from me, we

can hopefully progress to a more profitable general case.

I am of the last quarter of the last generation that remembers radio drama as an
active

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force-a dramatic art form with its own set of reality. This is a true statement as
far as it goes,

but of course it doesn't go anywhere near far enough. Radio's real golden age ended
around

1950, the year at which this book's casual attempt at media history begins, the year

I

celebrated my third birthday and began my first full year of doing it in the potty.

As a child of

the media, I have been pleased to have attended the healthy birth of rock and roll,
and to have

seen it grow up fast and healthy . . . but I was also in attendance, during my

younger years, at

the deathbed of radio as a strong fictional medium.

Drama is still to be found on the radio, God knows- CBS Mystery Theater is a case in point-and there is even comedy, as every devoted follower of that abysmally inept superhero,

Chickenman, knows. But the Mystery Theater seems oddly flat, oddly dead; a curiosity only.

There is none of the heavy emotional zap that used to come out of the radio when

Inner

Sanctum's creaking door swung open each week, or during Dimension X, I Love a

Mystery, or

the early days of Suspense. Although I listen to Mystery Theater when I can (and happen to

think that E. G. Marshall does a great job as host), I don't particularly recommend it; it is a fluke

like a Studebaker that still runs-poorly-or the last surviving auk. Even more than these, CBS

Mystery Theater is like an electrical power cable through which a heavy, almost lethal, current

used to run and which now lies inexplicably cold and harmless. The Adventures of

Chickenman, a syndicated comedy program, works much better (but comedy, a naturally auditory as well as visual medium, often does), but the intrepid, klutzy Chickenman is still

something of an acquired taste, like taking snuff or eating escargots. My own favorite moment

in Chickenman's career occurs when he gets on the crosstown bus clad in boots,
tights, and
cape, only to discover that, since he has no pockets, he doesn't have a dime for the
fare box.*

And still, endearing as Chickenman seems as he stumbles gamely from one abysmal
situation

to another-with his Jewish mother always close behind, bearing advice and chicken
soup with

matzoh balls-he is never quite in focus for me . . . except maybe for that one
priceless

moment as he stands slumped before the bus driver, cape between his legs. I smile at
Chickenman; I have occasionally even chuckled; but there are never moments as
gut-bustingly

funny as the moments when Fibber McGee, as unstoppable as Time itself, would
approach his

closet or when Chester A. Riley would engage in long and uneasy conversations with
his

next-door neighbor, a mortician named Digger O'Dell ("He sure is swell").

Of the radio programs I remember with the most clarity, the only one which properly
belongs

in the clause macabre was Suspense, also presented by the CBS Radio Network.

My grandfather (the one who worked for Winslow Homer as a young man) and I really
presided at the death rattle of radio together. He was fairly hale and fairly hearty
at the age of

eighty-two, but incomprehensible because he had a heavy beard and no teeth. He would
talk-volubly at times-but only my mother could really understand what he was saying.

"Gizzen-groppen fuzzwah grupp?" he might ask me as we sat listening to his old

Philco table

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model. "That's right, Daddy Guy," I'd say, with not the slightest idea of what I'd agreed to.

Nonetheless, we had the radio to unite us.

At this time-around 1958-my grandmother and grandfather lived together in a combination bed-sitting room that was a converted parlor, the biggest room in a small New

England house. He was ambulatory -barely-but my grandmother was blind and bedridden and

horribly corpulent, a victim of hypertension. Occasionally her mind would clear; mostly she

would go into long, excited rants, telling us that the horse needed to be fed, the fires needed to

be banked, that someone had to get her up so she could bake pies for the Elks supper.

Sometimes she

*And for some people, Chickenman doesn't work at all. My good friend Mac McCutcheon once played an album

of the Great Fowl's adventures to a group of friends who simply sat and listened with polite, blank expressions on

their faces. No one even chuckled. As Steve Martin says in The jerk: "Take those snails off her plate and bring her

the toasted cheese sandwich like I told you in the first place!"

talked to Flossie, one of my mother's sisters. Flossie had died of spinal meningitis

forty years

ago. So the situation in that room was this: my grandfather was lucid but

incomprehensible; my

grandmother was comprehensible but far gone in senility.

Somewhere in between was Daddy Guy's radio.

On radio nights, I would bring in a chair and place it in my grandfather's corner of

the room,

and he would fire up one of his huge cigars. The gong would sound for Suspense, or

Johnny

Dollar would begin to spin that week's tale through the unique (so far as I know)

device of

itemizing his expense account, or the voice of Bill Conrad as Matt Dillon would come

on, deep

and somehow unutterably weary: "It makes a man watchful . . . and a little lonely."

For me, the

smell of strong cigar smoke in a small room brings up its own set of ghost

referents: Sunday

night radio with my grandfather. The creak of batwing doors, the jingle of spurs . .

. or the

scream at the end of that classic Suspense episode, "You Died Last Night."

They died, all right, one by one, that last handful of radio programs. Johnny Dollar

went first;

he totted up his last expense account and drifted away into whatever limbo waits for

retired

insurance investigators. Gunsmoke went a year or two later. TV audiences had associated the face of Matt Dillon, only imagined for the previous ten years or so, with that of James Arness, Kitty's with Amanda Blake, Doc's with Milburn Stone, and Chester's, of course, with the face of Dennis Weaver. Their faces and their voices eclipsed the voices which came from the radio, and even now, twenty years later, it is the eager, slightly whining voice of Weaver that I associate with Chester Good as he comes hurrying up the Dodge City boardwalk with gimpy enthusiasm, calling, "Mr. Dillon! Mr. Dillon! There's trouble down t'the Longbranch!"

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It was Suspense, the last of the grisly old horrors, that held out the longest, but by then TV had demonstrated its ability to produce its own horrors; like Gunsmoke, Inner Sanctum had made the jump from radio to video, the swinging door finally visible. And visible, it certainly was horrible enough-slightly askew, festooned with cobwebs-but it was something of a relief, just the same. Nothing could have looked as horrible as that door sounded. I'm going to

avoid any

long dissertation on just why radio died, or in what ways it was superior to

television in terms of

the imaginal requirements it imposed on the listener (although we will touch

briefly on

some of this when we talk about the great Arch Oboler), because radio drama has been

rather

overanalyzed and certainly overeulogized. A little nostalgia is good for the soul,

and I think I

have already indulged in mine.

But I do want to say something about imagination purely as a tool in the art and

science of

scaring the crap out of people. The idea isn't original with me; I heard it

expressed by William

F. Nolan at the 1979 World Fantasy Convention. Nothing is so frightening as what's

behind the

closed door, Nolan said. You approach the door in the old, deserted house, and you

hear

something scratching at it. The audience holds its breath along with the protagonist

as she/he

(more often she) approaches that door. The protagonist throws it open, and there is

a

tenfoot-tall bug. The audience screams, but this particular scream has an oddly

relieved sound

to it. "A bug ten feet tall is pretty horrible," the audience thinks, "but I can

deal with a

ten-foot-tall bug. I was afraid it might be a hundred feet tall."

Consider, if you will, the most frightening sequence in *The Changeling*. The heroine

(Trish

Van Devere) has rushed off to the haunted house her new friend (George C. Scott) has

rented,

thinking he may need help. Scott is not there at all, but a series of small,

stealthy sounds leads

her to believe that he is. The audience watches, mesmerized, as Trish climbs to the

second

floor; the third floor; and finally she negotiates the narrow, cobwebby steps

leading to the attic

room where a young boy has been murdered in particularly nasty fashion some eighty

years

before. When she reaches the room, the dead boy's wheelchair suddenly whirls around

and

pursues her, chasing her screaming down all three flights of stairs, racing along

after her as

she runs down the hall, to finally overturn near the front door. The audience

screams as the

empty wheelchair chases the lady, but the real scare has already happened; it comes

as the

camera dwells on those long, shadowy staircases, as we try to imagine walking up

those stairs

toward some as-yet-unseen horror waiting to happen.

Bill Nolan was speaking as a screenwriter when he offered the example of the big

b,-g

behind the door, but the point applies to all media. What's behind the door or
lurking at the top

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of the stairs is never as frightening as the door or the staircase itself. And

because of this,

comes the paradox: the artistic work of horror is almost always a disappointment. It
is the

classic no-win situation. You can scare people with the unknown for a long, long
time (the

classic example, as Bill Nolan also pointed out, is the Jacques Tourneur film with
Dana

Andrews, *Curse of the Demon*), but sooner or later, as in poker, you have to turn
your down

cards up. You have to open the door and show the audience what's behind it. And if
what

happens to be behind it is a bug, not ten but a hundred feet tall, the audience
heaves a sigh of

relief (or utters a scream of relief) and thinks, "A bug a hundred feet tall is
pretty horrible, but I

can deal with that. I was afraid it might be a thousand feet tall." The thing is-and
a pretty good

thing for the human race, too, with such neato-keeno things to deal with as Dachau,

Hiroshima, the Children's Crusade, mass starvation in Cambodia, and what happened in

Jonestown, Guyana-the human consciousness can deal with almost anything . . which

leaves

the writer or director of the horror tale with a problem which is the psychological

equivalent of

inventing a faster-than-light space drive in the face of $E=MC^2$.

There is and always has been a school of horror writers (I am not among them) who

believe

that the way to beat this rap is to never open the door at all. The classic example

of this-it

even involves a door-is the Robert Wise version of Shirley Jackson's novel *The*

Haunting of

Hill House. The film and the book do not differ greatly in terms of plot, but they

differ

significantly, I think, in terms of thrust, point of view, and final effect. (We

were talking about

radio, weren't we? Well, we'll get back to it, I guess, sooner or later.) Later on

we will have

some converse of Ms. Jackson's excellent novel, but for now let's deal with the

film. In it, an

anthropologist (Richard Johnson) whose hobby is ghost hunting invites a party of

three to

summer with him at the infamous Hill House, where any number of nasty things have

occurred

in the past and where, from time to time, ghosts may (or may not) have been seen.

The party

includes two ladies who have' previously experienced aspects of the invisible world

(Julie

Harris and Claire Bloom) and the happy-go-lucky nephew of the present owner (played by

Russ Tamblyn, that old dancing fool from the film version of West Side Story).

The housekeeper, Mrs. Dudley, offers each her simple, bone-chilling catechism as they

arrive: "No one lives any closer than town; no one will come any closer than that.

So no one

will hear you if you scream. In the night. In the dark."

Of course Mrs. Dudley is proved absolutely right, and that right early. The four of them

experience a steadily escalating run of horrors, and happy-go-lucky Luke ends by saying that

the property he has so looked forward to inheriting should be burned flat . . . and the ground

seeded with salt.

For our purposes here, the interesting thing lies in the fact that we never actually see

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whatever it is that haunts Hill House. Something is there, all right. Something holds hands with

the terrified Eleanor in the night-she thinks it's Theo, but finds out the next day that Theo

hasn't even been close to her. Something knocks on the wall with a sound like cannonfire. And

most apropos to where we are now, this same something causes a door to bulge
grotesquely

inward until it looks like a great convex bubble-a sight so unusual to the eye that
the mind

reacts with horror. In Nolan's terms, something is scratching at the door. In a very
real way, in

spite of fine acting, fine direction, and the marvelous black and white photography
of David

Boulton, what we have in the Wise film (title shortened to The Haunting) is one of
the world's

few radio horror movies. Something is scratching at that ornate, paneled door,
something

horrible . . . but it is a door Wise elects never to open.

Lovecraft would open the door . . . but only a crack. Here is the final entry of
Robert Blake's

diary in the story "The Haunter of the Dark," which was dedicated to Robert Bloch:

Sense of distance gone-far is near and near is far. No light-no glass-see that
steeple-that tower-window-can hear-Roderick Usher-am mad or going mad-the
thing is stirring and fumbling in the tower-I am it and it is I-I want to get out .

. . must get

out and unify the forces . . . It knows where I am . . .

I am Robert Blake, but I see the tower in the dark. There is a monstrous odor . . .
senses

transfigured . . . boarding at that tower window cracking and giving way . . . I'd .

. . ngai . . .

ygg . . .

I see it-coming here-hell-wind-titan blur-black wings-Yog-Sothoth save me-the
three-lobed burning eye . . .

So the tale ends, leaving us with only the vaguest intimations of what Robert
Blake's haunter

may have been. "I cannot describe it," protagonist after protagonist tells us. "If I
did, you would

go mad with fear." But somehow I doubt that. I think both Wise and Lovecraft before
him

understood that to open the door, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, is to
destroy the

unified, dreamlike effect of the best horror. "I can deal with that," the audience
says to itself,

settling back, and bang! you just lost the ballgame in the bottom of the ninth.

My own disapproval of this method-we'll let the door bulge but we'll never open
it-comes

from the belief that it is playing to tie rather than to win. There is (or may be),
after all, that

hundredth case, and there is the whole concept of suspension of disbelief.

Consequently, I'd

rather yank the door open at some point during the festivities; I'd rather turn my
hole cards

face-up. And if the audience screams with laughter rather than terror, if they see
the zipper

running up the monster's back, then you just gotta go back to the drawing board and
try it

again.

The exciting thing about radio at its best was that it bypassed the whole question of whether

to open the door or leave it closed. Radio, by the very nature of the medium, was

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exempt. For

the listeners during the years 1930 to 1950 or so, there were no visual expectations to fulfill in

their set of reality.

What about this set of reality, then? Another example, for purposes of comparison and

contrast, from the movies. One of the classic fright films that I consistently missed as a child

was Val Lewton's Cat People, directed by Jacques Tourneur. Like Freaks, it is one of those

movies that comes up when the conversation among fans turns to what makes a "great horror

movie-others would include Curse of the Demon, Dead of Night, and The Creeping Unknown,

I suppose, but for now let's stick with the Lewton film. It's one that a great many people

remember with affection and respect from their childhoods-one that scared the crap out of

them. Two specific sequences from the film are always brought up; both involve Jane

Randolph, the "good" girl, menaced by Simone Simon, the "bad" girl (who is, let's be fair, no more willfully evil than is poor old Larry Talbot in *The Wolf Man*). In one, Ms. Randolph is trapped in a deserted basement swimming pool while, somewhere nearby and getting closer all the time, a great jungle cat menaces her. In the other sequence, she is walking through Central Park and the cat is getting closer and closer . . . getting ready to spring . . . we hear a hard, coughing roar . . . which turns out only to be the airbrakes of an arriving bus. Ms. Randolph steps onto it, leaving the audience limp with relief and with the feeling that a horrible disaster has been averted by inches.

In terms of what it does psychologically, I wouldn't argue the thesis that *The Cat People* is a good, perhaps even a great, American film. It is almost certainly the best horror film of the forties. At the base of the myth of the cat people-werecats, if you like-is a deep sexual fear; Irena (Ms. Simon) has been convinced as a child that any outpouring of passion will cause her to change into a cat. Nevertheless, she marries Kent Smith, who is so smitten that he takes her to the altar even though we pretty much understand he'll be spending his wedding

nightand

many nights thereafter-sleeping on the couch. No wonder the poor guy eventually

turns

to Jane Randolph.

But to return to those two scenes: the one in the swimming pool works quite well.

Lewton,

like Stanley Kubrick with *The Shining*, is the master of context here, lighting the

scene to

perfection and controlling every variable. We feel the truth of that scene

everywhere, from the

tilled walls, the lap of the water in the pool, to that slightly flat echo when Ms.

Randolph speaks

(to ask that time-honored horror movie question, "Who's there?"). And I am sure the

Central

Park scene worked for audiences of the forties, but today it simply will not wash;

even out in

the sticks, audiences would hoot and laugh at it.

I finally saw the movie as an adult, and puzzled for some time over what all the

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shouting

could have been about. I think I finally figured out why that Central Park stalking

scene worked

then but doesn't work now. It has something to do with what film technicians call

"state of the

art." But this is only the technician's way of referring to that thing I have called
"visual set" or
"the set of reality."

If you should get a chance to see *The Cat People* on TV or at a revival house in or
near your
city, pay particular attention to that sequence where Irena stalks Jane Randolph as
Ms.

Randolph hurries to catch her bus. Take a moment to look at it closely and you'll
see it is not

Central Park at all. It's a set built on a soundstage. A little thought will suggest
a reason why.

Tourneur, who wanted to be in control of lighting at all times, * didn't elect to
shoot on set; he
simply had no choice. "The state of the art" in 1942 did not allow for night
shooting on location.

So instead of shooting in daylight with a heavy filter, a technique that shows up as
even more

glaringly faked, Tourneur quite sensibly opted for the soundstage-and it is
interesting to me

that, some forty years later, Stanley Kubrick did exactly the same thing with *The
Shining* . . .

and like Lewton and Tourneur before him, Kubrick is a director who shows an almost
exquisite

sensitivity to the nuances of light and shadow.

To theatrical audiences of the time there was no false note in this; they were used
to

integrating movie sets into their imaginative processes. Sets were simply accepted, the way we might accept a single piece of scenery or two in a play that calls (as Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* does) for mostly "bare stage"-this is an acceptance that the Victorian playgoer would simply have balked at. He or she might accept the principle of the bare stage, but emotionally the play would lose most of its effect and its charm. The Victorian playgoer would be apt to find *Our Town* outside her or his set of reality. For me, the scene in Central Park lost its believability for the same reason. As the camera moves with Ms. Randolph, everything surrounding her screams fake! fake! fake! to my eye. While I was supposed to be worrying about whether or not Jane Randolph was going to be attacked, I found myself worrying instead about that papier-mache stone wall in the background. When the bus finally pulls up, the chuff of its air *William F. Nolan, mentioning this film, said that the memory which remained with him most strongly from the Central Park sequence was the pattern of "light-shadow-light-shadow-light-shadow" as the camera moves with Ms. Randolph-and it is indeed a fine, eerie effect. brakes miming the cat's cheated growl, I was wondering if it was hard getting that

New York

City bus onto a closed soundstage and if the bushes in the background were real or plastic.

The set of reality changes, and the boundaries of that mental country where the imagination

may be fruitfully employed (Rod Serling's apt phrase for it, now a part of the

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American idiom,

was the Twilight Zone) are in near-constant flux. By the 1960s, the decade when I saw more

movies than I ever have since, the "state of the art" had advanced to a point where a set and

soundstages had become nearly obsolete. New fast films had made available-light shooting

perfectly possible. In 1942 Val Lewton could not shoot in Central Park by night, but in Barry

Lyndon Stanley Kubrick shot several scenes by candlelight. This is a quantum technical leap

which has this paradoxical effect: it robs the bank of imagination. Perhaps realizing the fact,

Kubrick takes a giant step backward to the soundstage with his next film, *The Shining*. *

All of this may seem far afield from the subject of radio drama and the question of whether

or not to open the door on the monster, but we're really standing right next to both

subjects. As

movie audiences of the forties and fifties believed Lewton's Central Park set, so

radio listeners

believed what the announcers, the actors, and the soundmen told them. The visual set

was

there, but it was plastic, bound by very few hard and fast expectations. When you

made the

monster in your mind, there was no zipper running down its back; it was a perfect

monster.

Audiences of today listening to old tapes don't accept the Make-Believe Ballroom any

more

than I am able to accept Lewton's papier-mache rock wall; we are simply hearing a

1940s

deejay playing records in a studio. But to audiences of a different day, the

MakeBelieve

Ballroom was more real than make-believe; you could imagine the men in their

tuxedos, the

women in their gowns and smooth elbowlength gloves, the flaring wall sconces, and

Tommy

Dorsey, resplendent in white dinner jacket, conducting. Or in the case of the

infamous Orson

Welles broadcast of The War of the Worlds, a Mercury Theater Halloween presentation

(and

that was a trick-or-treat millions of Americans never forgot), you could broaden

that country of

the imagination

*Want more proof of how the set of reality changes, whether we want it to or not?

Remember Bonanza, which

ran on NBC for a thousand years or so? Check it out in syndication someday. Look at

that Ponderosa set-the

front yard, the big family room-and ask yourself how you ever believed it was

"real." It seemed real because we

were used to seeing TV series shot on soundstages up until 1965 or so; nowadays even

TV producers don't use

soundstages for exteriors. The state of the art has, for better or worse, moved on.

enough to send people screaming into the streets. On TV it wouldn't have worked, but

on the

radio there were no zippers running down the Martians' backs.

Radio avoided the open-door/closed-door question, I think, because radio deposited

to that

bank of imagination rather than making withdrawals in the name of "state of the

art." Radio

made it real.

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2

My first experience with real horror came at the hands of Ray Bradbury-it was an

adaptation of his story "Mars Is Heaven!" on Dimension X. This would have been

broadcast

around 1951, which would have made me four at the time. I asked to listen, and was

denied

permission by my mother. "It's on too late," she said, "and it would be much too
upsetting for a
little boy your age."

At some other time Mom told me that one of her sisters almost cut her wrists in the
bathtub
during the Orson Welles War of the Worlds broadcast. My aunt was not going about it
hastily;
she could look out the bathroom window and had, she said later, no plans at all to
make the
cuts until she saw the Martian death machines looming on the horizon. I guess you
could say
my aunt had found the Welles broadcast too upsetting . . . and my mother's words
echo down
to me over the years like a voice in an uneasy dream that has never really ended:

"Too
upsetting . . . upsetting . . . upsetting . . ."

I crept down to the door to listen anyway, and she was right: it was plenty
upsetting.

Space travelers land on Mars-only it isn't Mars at all. It's good old Greentown,
Illinois, and
it's inhabited by all the voyagers' dead friends and relatives. Their mothers are
here, their
sweethearts, good old Clancey the patrolman, Miss Henreys from the second grade. On
Mars,
Lou Gehrig is still pounding them over the fences for the Yankees.

Mars is heaven, the space travelers decide. The locals take the crew of the spaceship into their homes, where they sleep the sleep of those perfectly at peace, full of hamburgers and hotdogs and Mom's apple pie. Only one member of the crew suspects the unspeakable obscenity, and he's right. Boy, is he right! And yet even he has awakened to the realization of this deadly illusion too late . . . because in the night, these well-loved faces begin to drip and run and change. Kind, wise eyes become black tar pits of murderous hate. The rosy apple cheeks of Grandma and Grandpa lengthen and turn yellow. Noses elongate into wrinkled trunks. Mouths become gaping maws. It is a night of creeping horror, a night of hopeless screams and belated terror, because Mars isn't heaven after all. Mars is a hell of hate and deception and murder.

I didn't sleep in my bed that night; that night I slept in the doorway, where the real and rational light of the bathroom bulb could shine on my face. That was the power of radio at its height. The Shadow, we were assured at the beginning of each episode, had "the power to cloud men's minds." It strikes me that, when it comes to fiction in the media, it is television and movies which so often cloud that part of our minds where the imagination moves most

fruitfully;

they do so by imposing the dictatorship of the visual set.

If you view imagination as a mental creature of a hundred different possible forms

(imagine,

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if you will, Larry Talbot not just condemned to turn into a wolf man at the full of

the moon but

into an entire bestiary on successive nights; everything from a wereshark to a

wereflea), then

one of the forms is that of a rampaging gorilla, a creature that is dangerous and

totally out of

control.

If this seems fanciful or melodramatic, think of your own children or the children

of close

friends (never mind your own childhood; you may remember events that took place then

with

some fidelity, but most of your memories of how the emotional weather was then will

be utterly

false), and of the times when they simply find themselves unable to turn off the

second-floor

light or go down into the cellar or maybe even bring a coat from the closet because

they saw or

heard something that frightened them-and not necessarily a movie or a TV program,

either.

I've mentioned the fearsome twi-night double-header already; John D. MacDonald tells the

story of how for weeks his son was terrified of something he called "the green ripper."

MacDonald and his wife finally figured it out-at a dinner party, a friend had mentioned the

Grim Reaper. What their son had heard was green ripper, and later it became the title of one of

MacDonald's Travis McGee stories.

A child may be frightened by such a wide sweep of things that adults generally understand

that to worry about this overmuch is to endanger all relations with the child; you begin to feel

like a soldier in the middle of a minefield. Added to this is another complicating factor:

sometimes we frighten our kids on purpose. Someday, we say, a man in a black car may stop

and offer you a sweet to take a ride with him. And that is a Bad Man (read: the Boogeyman),

and if he stops for you, you must never, never, never . . .

Or: Instead of giving that tooth to the Tooth Fairy, Ginny, let's put it in this glass of Coke.

Tomorrow morning that tooth will be all gone. The Coke will dissolve it. So think about it the

next time you have a quarter and . . .

Or: Little boys who play with matches wet the bed, they just can't help it, so don't

you . . .

Or that all-time favorite: Don't put that in your mouth, you don't know where it's been.

Most children deal with their fears quite well . . . most of the time, anyway. The shape-changing of their imaginations is so wide, so marvelously varied, that the gorilla pops

out of the deck only infrequently. Besides worrying about what might be in the closet or under

the bed, they have to imagine themselves as firefighters and policemen (imagination as the

Very Gentle Perfect Knight), as mothers and nurses, as superheroes of various stripes and

types, as their own parents, dressed up in attic clothes and giggling hand in hand before a

mirror which shows them the future in the most unthreatening way. They need to experience a

whole range of emotions from love to boredom, to try them out like new shoes.

But every now and then the gorilla gets out. Children understand that this face of their

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imagination must be caged ("It's only a movie, that couldn't really happen, could it?" . . . Or as

Judith Viorst writes in one of her fine children's books, "My mom says there are no ghosts,

vampires, and zombies . . . but . . .") . But their cages are of necessity more
flimsy than those
their elders build. I do not believe there are people out there with no imagination
at all-although
I have come to believe that there are a few who lack even the most rudimentary sense
of
humor-but it sometimes seems that way . . . perhaps because some people seem to
build not
just cages for the gorilla but Chase Manhattan Bank-type safes. Complete with time
locks.
I remarked to an interviewer once that most great writers have a curious childish
look to their
faces, and that this seems even more pronounced in the faces of those who write
fantasy. It is
perhaps most noticeable in the face of Ray Bradbury, who retains very strongly the
look of the
boy he was in Illinois-his face retains this indefinable look in spite of his
sixty-plus years, his
graying hair, his heavy glasses. Robert Bloch has the face of a sixth-grade cutup,
the Klass
Klown, don't you know, although he is past sixty (just how far past I would not
venture to
guess; he might send Norman Bates after me); it is the face of the kid who sits in
the back of
the classroom-at least until the teacher assigns him a place up front, which usually
doesn't

take long-and makes screeching sounds on the top of his desk with the palms of his hands.

Harlan Ellison has the face of a tough inner-city kid, confident enough in himself to be kind in

most cases, but more than able to fuck you over royally if you give him any shit.

But perhaps the look I'm trying to describe (or indicate; actual description is really

impossible) is most visible on the face of Isaac Bashevis Singer, who, while regarded as a

"straight" writer of literature by the critical establishment, has nonetheless made the

cataloguing of devils, angels, demons, and dybbuks a good part of his career. Grab a Singer

book and take a good look at the author photo (you can read the book, too, when you're done

looking at Singer's picture, okay?). It is the face of an old man, but that is a surface so thin you

could read a newspaper through it. The boy is beneath, stamped very clearly on his features.

It's in his eyes, mostly; they are young and clear.

One of the reasons for these "young faces" may be that writers of fantasy rather like the

gorilla. They have never taken the trouble to strengthen the cage, and as a result, part of them

has never accomplished the imaginative going-away that is so much a part of growing

up, of

establishing the tunnel vision so necessary for a successful career as an adult. One

of the

paradoxes of fantasy/horror is that the writer of this stuff is like the lazy pigs

who built their

houses of straw and sticks-but instead of learning their lesson and building

sensible brick

houses like their oh-so-adult elder brother (memorialized in his engineer's cap

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forever in my

memory by the Disney cartoon), the writer of fantasy/ horror simply rebuilds with

sticks and

straw again. Because, in a crazy kind of way, he or she likes it when the wolf comes

and blows

it all down, just as he or she sorta likes it when the gorilla escapes from its

cage.

Most people aren't fantasy writers, of course, but almost all of us recognize the

need to feed

the imagination some of the stuff from time to time. People seem to recognize that

the

imagination somehow needs a dose of it, like vitamins or iodized salt to avoid

goiter. Fantasy is

salt for the mind.

Earlier on I talked about the suspension of disbelief, Coleridge's classic

definition of what the

reader must provide when seeking a hot shot from a fantasy story, novel, or poem.

Another

way of putting this is that the reader must agree to let the gorilla out of its cage

for a while, and

when we see the zipper running up the monster's back, the gorilla goes promptly back

into its

cage. After all, by the time we get to be forty or so, it's been in there for a long

time, and

perhaps it's developed a bit of the old "institutional mentality." Sometimes it has

to be prodded

out with a stick. And sometimes it won't go at all.

Seen in these terms, the set of reality- becomes a very difficult thing to

manipulate. Of

course it has been done in the movies; if it had not been, this book would be

shorter by a third

or more. But by detouring around the visual part of the set of reality, radio

developed an

awesome tool (perhaps even a dangerous one; the riot and national hysteria following

The

War of the Worlds broadcast suggests that it could have been so) * for picking the

lock on the

gorilla's cage. But in spite of all the nostalgia we might want to feel, it is

impossible to go back

and reexperience the creative essence of radio terror; that particular lock pick has

been broken

by the simple fact that, for better or worse, -ve now demand believable visual input as part of the set of reality. Like it or lump it, we seem to be stuck with it.

3

We're almost done with our brief discussion of radio now-I think that to do much more

would be to risk droning along like one of those tiresome cinema buffs who want to spend the

night telling you how Charlie Chaplin was the greatest screen actor who ever lived or that the

Clint Eastwood spaghetti westerns stand at the apex of the Existential/Absurdist movementbut

no discussion of the phenomenon of radio terror, no matter how brief, would be complete

without some mention of the genre's prime auteur-not Orson Welles, but Arch Oboler, the first

playright to have his own national radio series, the chilling Lights Out.

Lights Out was actually broadcast in the forties, but enough of the programs were rebroadcast in the fifties (and even in the sixties) for me to feel I can justify their inclusion here.

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The one I remember most vividly from its rebroadcast on Dimension X was "The Chicken Heart that Ate the World." Oboler, like so many people in the horror field-Alfred Hitchcock is

another prime example-are extremely alert to the humor implicit in horror, and this

alertness

was never on better view than in the Chicken Heart story, which made you giggle at

its very

absurdity even as the gooseflesh raced up and down your arms.

"You remember that only a few days ago you asked me my opinion on how the world

would

end?" the scholarly scientist who has un-

*Or what about Hitler? Most of us associate him now with newsreel footage and forget

that in the pretelevision

thirties, Hitler used radio with a kind of malevolent brilliance. My guess is that

two or three appearances on Meet

the Press or maybe one you're-on-the-griddle 60 Minutes segment with Mike Wallace

would have cooked Hitler's

goose quite effectively.

wittingly perpetrated the horror on an unsuspecting world solemnly tells his young

protégé as

they fly at 5,000 feet in a light plane over the ever-growing chicken heart. "You

remember my

answer? Oh, such a scholarly prophecy! Mighty-sounding theories about cessation of

earth

rotation . . . entropy . . . but now, this is reality, Louis! The end has come for

humanity! Not in

the red of atomic fusion . . . not in the glory of interstellar combustion . . . not

in the peace of

white, cold silence . . . but with that! That creeping, grasping flesh below us. It

is a joke, eh,

Louis? The joke of the cosmos! The end of mankind . . . because of a chicken heart."

"No," Louis gibbers. "No, I can't die. I'll find a safe landing place- "

But then, perfectly on cue, the comforting drone of the plane's engine in the background

becomes a coughing stutter. "We're in a spin!" Louis screams.

"The end of all mankind," the doctor proclaims in stentorian tones, and the two of them fall

directly into the chicken heart. We hear its steady beat . . . louder . . . louder .

. . and then the

sickly splash that ends the play. Part of Oboler's real genius was that when

"Chicken Heart"

ended, you felt like laughing and throwing up at the same time.

"Cue the bombers," an old ad for radio used to run (drone of bombers in the background;

the mind's eye visualizes a sky black with Flying Forts). "Drop the ice cream into Puget

Sound," the voice continues (whining, hydraulic sound of bomb bays opening, a rising whistle

followed by a gigantic splash). "All right . . . cue the chocolate syrup . . . the whipped cream . . .

and . . . drop the maraschino cherries!" We hear a great liquid squishing sound as the

chocolate syrup goes, then a huge hissing as the whipped cream follows. These sounds are

followed by a heavy plop . . . plop . . . plop in the background. And, absurd as it

may be, the
mind responds to these cues; that interior eye actually sees a series of gigantic
ice cream
sundaes rising out of Puget Sound like strange volcanic cones-each with a maraschino
cherry the size of Seattle's Kingdome on top of it. In fact we see those
disgustingly red cocktail
cherries raining down, plopping into all that whipped cream and leaving craters

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nearly the size
of Great Tycho. Thank the genius of Stan Freberg.
Arch Oboler, a restlessly intelligent man who was also involved in the movies (Five,
one of
the first films to deal with the survival of mankind after World War III, was
Oboler's brainchild)
and the legitimate theater, utilized two of radio's great strengths: the first is
the mind's innate
obedience, its willingness to try to see whatever someone suggests it see, no matter
how
absurd; the second is the fact that fear and horror are blinding emotions that knock
our adult
pins from beneath us and leave us groping in the dark like children who cannot find
the light
switch. Radio is, of course, the "blind" medium, and only Oboler used it so well or
so

completely.

Of course, our modern ears pick up the necessary conventions of the medium that have been outgrown (mostly due to our growing dependence on the visual in our set of reality), but

these were standard practices which audiences of the day had no trouble accepting (like

Tourneur's papier-mâché rock wall in *Cat People*). If these conventions seem jarring to

listeners of the eighties, as the asides in a Shakespearean play seem jarring to a novice

playgoer, then that is our problem, to work out as best we can.

One of these conventions is the constant use of narration to move the story. A

second is

dialogue-as-description, a technique necessary to radio but one TV and the movies have

rendered obsolete. Here, for instance, from "The Chicken Heart that Ate the World," is Dr.

Alberts discussing the chicken heart itself with Louis-read the passage and then ask yourself

how true this speech rings to your TV- and movie-trained ears:

"Look at it down there . . . a great blanket of evil covering everything. See how the roads are

black with men and women and their children, fleeing for their lives. See how the protoplasmic

gray reaches out and engulfs' them."

On TV, this would be laughed out of court as total corn; it is not hip, as they say.

But heard

in the darkness, coupled with the drone of the light plane's engine in the

background, it works

very well indeed. Willingly or unwillingly, the mind conjures up the image Oboler

wants: this

great jellylike blob, beating rhythmically, swallowing up the refugees as they run .

. . .

Ironically, television and the early talkies both depended on the largely auditory

conventions

of radio until these new mediums found their own voices-and their own conventions.

Most of us

can remember the narrative "bridges" used in the early TV dramas (there was, for

instance,

that peculiar-looking individual Truman Bradley, who gave us a miniscience lesson at

the

beginning of each week's episode of Science Fiction Theater and a mini-moral at the

end of

each episode; the last but perhaps the best example of the convention were the

voice-overs

done by the late Walter Winchell each week for The Untouchables). But if we look at

those

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early talking pictures, we can also find these same dialogue-as-description and

narration

devices used. There is no real need for it, because we can see what's happening, but they remained for awhile just the same, a kind of useless appendix, present simply because evolution had not removed them. My favorite example of this comes from the otherwise innovative Max Fleischer Superman cartoons of the early forties. Each began with the narrator explaining solemnly to the audience that once there was a planet called Krypton "which glowed like a great green jewel in the heavens." And there it is, by George, glowing like a great green jewel in the heavens, right before our eyes. A moment later it blows to smithereens in a blinding flash of light. "Krypton exploded," the narrator informs us helpfully as the pieces fly away into space. Just in case we missed it. *

Oboler used a third mental trick in creating his radio dramas, and this goes back to Bill

Nolan and his closed door. When it's thrown open, he says, we see a ten-foot bug, and the

mind, whose capacity to visualize far outruns any state of the art, feels relief.

The mind,

although obedient (what is insanity conceived of by the sane, after all, if not a kind of mental

disobedience?), is curiously pessimistic, and more often than not, downright morbid.

Because he rarely overdid the dialogue-as-description device (as did the creators of

The

Shadow and Inner Sanctum), Oboler was able to use this natural turn of the mind

toward the

morbid and the pessimistic to create some of the most outrageous effects ever

paraded before

the quaking ears of a mass audience. Today, violence on television has been roundly

condemned (and largely exterminated, at least by the Untouchables, Peter Gunn, and

Thriller

standards of the bad old sixties)

* "Staging" was another convention that both the early talkies and early TV leaned

upon heavily until they found

their own more fluid methods of storytelling. Check out some TV kinescopes from the

fifties sometime, or an early

talking film like *It Happened One Night*, *The Jazz Singer*, or *Frankenstein*, and

notice how often the scenes are

played out from one stationary camera location, as if the camera was in reality a

representative playgoer with a

front-row seat. Speaking of the pioneering director of silents, Georges Méliès, in

his fine book *Caligari's Children*,

S. S. Prawer makes the same observation: "The double exposures, jump-cuts, and other

technical tricks which

Méliès played with the shots he had taken from a fixed position corresponding to a

fixed seat in the stalls of a

theatre-these amused rather than frightened their audiences, and, in the end,

wearied them sufficiently to

ensure Méliès's bankruptcy."

In regard to the early talkies, which came nearly forty years after Méliès pioneered the fantasy film and the idea of "special effects," audio limitations dictated the stationary camera to some extent; the camera made a loud clacking noise as it operated, and the only way to beat it was to put it in a soundproof room with a glass window.

Moving the camera meant moving the room, and that was expensive in terms of time as well as money. But it was

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danse macabre Stephen King more than camera noise, a factor Méliès certainly didn't have to contend with. A lot of it was simply that mental set thing again. Bound by stage conventions, many early directors simply found themselves creatively unable to innovate.

because so much of it is explicit-we see the blood flowing; that is the nature of the medium and part of the set of reality.

Oboler used gore and violence by the bucketload, but a good deal of it was implicit; the real horror didn't come alive in front of a camera but on the screen of the mind. Perhaps the best example of this comes from an Oboler piece with the Don Martin-like title, "A Day at the

Dentist's."

As the story opens, the play's "hero," a dentist, is just closing up shop for the day. His nurse

says he has one more patient, a man named Fred Houseman.

"He says it's an emergency," she tells him.

"Houseman?" the dentist barks.

"Yes."

"Fred?"

"Yes. . . do you know him?"

"No . . . oh, no," the dentist says casually.

Houseman, it turns out, has come because Dr. Charles, the dentist who owned the practice

previously, advertised himself as a "painless dentist"-and Houseman, although an ex-wrestler

and footballer, is terrified of the dentist (as so many of us are . . . and Oboler damned well

knows it).

Houseman's first uneasy moment comes when the doctor straps him into the dentist's chair.

He protests. The dentist tells him in a low, perfectly reasonable voice (and oh, how we suspect

the reason in that voice! After all, who sounds more sane than a dangerous lunatic?)

that "In

order to keep this painless, there must be absolutely no movement."

There is a pause, and then the sound of straps being buckled.

Tightly.

"There," the dentist says soothingly. "Snug as a bug in a rug . . . that's a curious
thin[, to call
you, isn't it? You're no bug, are you? You're more the lover-boy type . . . aren't
you?"

Oh-oh, the morbid little guy inside speaks up. This looks bad for old Fred Houseman.

Yes

indeedy.

It is bad indeed. The dentist, still speaking in that low, pleasant, and
oh-so-rational voice,

continues to call Houseman "lover-boy." It turns out that Houseman ruined the girl
who later

became the dentist's wife; Houseman slandered her name from one end of town to the
other.

The dentist found out that Houseman's regular dentist was Dr. Charles, and so he
bought out

Charles's practice, figuring that sooner or later Houseman would come back . . .
come back to

"the painless dentist."

And while he was waiting, the new dentist installed restraint straps on his chair.

Just for Fred Houseman.

All of this, of course, has parted company with any semblance of reality early on
(but then,

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the same can be said of *The Tempest*-how's that for an impudent comparison?); yet the
mind

cares not a fig for that at this crucial juncture, and Oboler, of course, never
cared at all; like the

best writers of horror fiction, he is interested in effect above all else,
preferably one that will

wallop the listener like a twenty-pound chunk of slate. He achieves that quite
nicely in "A Day

at the Dentist's."

"W-What are you going to do?" Houseman asks fearfully, echoing the very question
that has

been troubling our own minds almost since the moment we were foolish enough to turn
on this

piece of coldblooded grue.

The dentist's answer is simple and utterly terrifying-more terrifying because of the
unpleasant seminar it convenes in our own minds, a seminar in which Oboler
ultimately

refuses to take part, thus leaving the question to hang for as long as we want to
consider it.

Under the circumstances, we may not want to consider it long at all.

"Nothing important," the dentist replies as he flicks a switch and the drill begins
to whine.

"Just going to drill a little hole . . . and let out some of lover-boy."

As Houseman gasps and slobbers with fear in the background, the sound of the drill
comes

up . . . and up . . . and up . . . and finally, out. The end.

The question, of course, is where exactly did the demon dentist drill the hole to

"let out some
of lover-boy"? It is a question that only radio, by the very nature of the medium,
can pose really
convincingly and leave unanswered so uneasily. We hate Oboler a little for not
telling us,
mostly because our minds are suggesting the most outrageously nasty possibilities.
My first thought was that the dentist had almost surely used the drill on one of
Houseman's
temples, murdering him with a little impromptu brain surgery.
But later, as I grew up and grew into a better comprehension of just what the nature
of
Houseman's crime had been, another possibility began to suggest itself. An even
nastier one.
Even today, as I write this, I wonder: exactly where did that crazy man use his
drill?

4

Well, enough is enough; it is time to move on from the ear to the eye. But before we
go, I'd
like to remind you of something that you probably already know. Many of the old
radio
programs, from Inner Sanctum to Gangbusters to the sudsy Our Gal Sal have been
preserved
on record and tape, and the quality of these recordings is actually better in most
cases than
the quality of the TV kinescopes that are broadcast on nostalgia programs from time
to time. If

you're interested in seeing how your own ability to suspend disbelief and to

circumnavigate

that visual set engendered by TV and the movies is holding up, you can get a start

at almost

any well-stocked record store. A Schwann's Catalogue of spoken-word records can be

even

more helpful; what your friendly neighborhood Record Mart doesn't have, they'll be

glad to

order. And if your interest in Arch Oboler has been at all piqued by the foregoing,

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let me

whisper a little secret in your ear: Drop Dead! An Exercise in Horror-produced,

written, and

directed by Arch Oboler, available for your delectation on Capitol Records (Capitol:

SM-1763).

Probably more of a summer cooler than a tall glass of iced tea . . . if you can get

rid of that

visual set for forty minutes or so.

CHAPTER VI

The Modern American Horror Movie

-Text and ,Subtext

RIGHT NOW you could be thinking to yourself: this guy must have one hell of a nerve

if he

thinks he's gonna cover all the horror movies released between 1950 and

1980-everything

from The Exorcist to the less-than-immortal The Navy vs. the Night Monsters-in a single chapter.

Well, actually it's going to be two chapters, and no, I don't expect to be able to cover them

all, as much as I would like to; but yes, I must have some kind of nerve to be tackling the

subject at all. Luckily for me, there are several fairly traditional ways of handling the subject so

that at least an illusion of order and coherence emerges. The path I've chosen is that of the

horror movie as text and subtext.

The place to start, I think, would be with a swift recap of those points already made on the

subject of the horror movie as art. If we say "art" is any piece of creative work from which an

audience receives more than it gives (a liberal definition of art, sure, but in this field it doesn't

pay to be too picky), then I believe that the artistic value the horror movie most frequently

offers is its ability to form a liaison between our fantasy fears and our real fears. I've said and

will reemphasize here that few horror movies are conceived with "art" in mind; most are

conceived only with "profit" in mind. The art is not consciously created but rather

thrown off, as

an atomic pile throws off radiation.

I do not contend by saying the above that every exploitation horror flick is "art,"

however.

You could walk down Forty-second Street in Times Square on any given afternoon or evening

and discover films with names like The Bloody Mutilators, The Female Butcher, or The Ghastly

Ones-a 1972 film we are treated to the charming sight of a woman being cut open with a

two-handed bucksaw; the camera lingers as her intestines spew out onto the floor.

These are

squalid little films with no whiff of art in them, and only the most decadent

filmgoer would try to

argue otherwise. They are the staged equivalent of those 8- and 16- millimeter

"snuff" movies

which have reputedly oozed out of South America from time to time.

Another point worth mentioning is the great risk a filmmaker takes when he/she

decides to

make a horror picture. In other creative fields, the only risk is failure-we can

say, for instance,

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that the Mike Nichols film of The Day of the Dolphin "fails," but there is no public

outcry, no

mothers picketing the movie theaters. But when a horror movie fails, it often fails into painful absurdity or squalid porno-violence.

There are films which skate right up to the border where "art" ceases to exist in any form and exploitation begins, and these films are often the field's most striking successes. The

Texas Chainsaw Massacre is one of these; in the hands of Tobe Hooper, the film satisfies that

definition of art which I have offered, and I would happily testify to its redeeming social merit in

any court in the country. I would not do so for The Ghastly Ones. The difference is more than

the difference between a chainsaw and a bucksaw; the difference is something like seventy

million light-years. Hooper works in Chainsaw Massacre, in his own queerly apt way, with taste

and conscience. The Ghastly Ones is the work of morons with cameras. *

So, if I'm going to keep this discussion in order, I'll keep coming back to the concept of

value-of art, of social merit. If horror movies have redeeming social merit, it is because of that

ability to form liaisons between the real and unreal-to provide subtexts. And because of their

mass appeal, these subtexts are often culture-wide.

In many cases-particularly in the fifties and then again in the early seventies-the

fears

expressed are sociopolitical in nature, a fact that gives such disparate pictures as

Don Siegel's

Invasion of the Body Snatchers and William Friedkin's The Exorcist a crazily

convincing

documentary feel. When the horror movies wear their various sociopolitical hats-the

B-picture

as tabloid editorial-they often serve as an

*One success in skating over this thin ice does not necessarily guarantee that the

filmmaker will be able to

repeat such a success; while his innate talent saves Hooper's second film, Eaten

Alive, from descending to The

Bloody Mutilators category, it is still a disappointment. The only director I can

think of who has explored this gray

land between art and porno-exhibitionism successfully-even brilliantly-again and

again with never a misstep is

the Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg.

extraordinarily accurate barometer of those things which trouble the night-thoughts

of a whole

society.

But horror movies don't always wear a hat which identifies them as disguised

comments on

the social or political scene (as Cronenberg's The Brood comments on the

disintegration of the

generational family or as his They Came from Within treats of the more cannibalistic

sideeffects of Erica Jong's "zipless fuck"). More often the horror movie points even further inward, looking for those deep-seated personal fears-those pressure points-we all must cope with. This adds an element of universality to the proceedings, and may produce an even truer sort of art. It also explains, I think, why The Exorcist (a social horror film if there ever was

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danse macabre Stephen King one) did only so-so business when it was released in West Germany, a country which had an entirely different set of social fears at the time (they were a lot more worried about bomb-throwing radicals than about foul-talking young people), and why Dawn of the Dead went through the roof there.

This second sort of horror film has more in common with the Brothers Grimm than with the op-ed page in a tabloid paper. It is the B-picture as fairy tale. This sort of picture doesn't want to score political points but to scare the hell out of us by crossing certain taboo lines. So if my idea about art is correct (it giveth more than it receiveth), this sort of film is of value to the audience by helping it to better understand what those taboos and fears are, and why

it feels

so uneasy about them.

A good example of this second type of horror picture is RKO's *The Body Snatcher* (1945) ,

liberally adapted-and that's putting it kindly-from a Robert Louis Stevenson story and

starring Karloff and Lugosi. And by the way, the picture was produced by our friend Val

Lewton.

As an example of the art, *The Body Snatcher* is one of the forties' best. And as an example

of this second artistic "purpose"-that of breaking taboos-it positively shines.

I think we'd all agree that one of the great fears which all of us must deal with on a purely

personal level is the fear of dying; without good old death to fall back on, the horror movies

would be in bad shape. A corollary to this is that there are "good" deaths and "bad" deaths;

most of us would like to die peacefully in our beds at age eighty (preferably after a good meal,

a bottle of really fine vino, and a really super lay), but very few of us are interested in finding

out how it might feel to get slowly crushed under an automobile lift while crankcase oil drips

slowly onto our foreheads.

Lots of horror films derive their best effects from this fear of the bad death (as in The Abominable Dr. Phibes, where Phibes dispatches his victims one at a time using the Twelve Plagues of Egypt, slightly updated, a gimmick worthy of the Batman comics during their palmiest days). Who can forget the lethal binoculars in Horrors of the Black Museum, for instance? They came equipped with spring-loaded six-inch prongs, so that when the victim put them to her eyes and then attempted to adjust the field of focus . . .

Others derive their horror simply from the fact of death itself, and the decay which follows death. In a society where such a great store is placed in the fragile commodities of youth, health, and beauty (and the latter, it seems to me, is very often defined in terms of the former two), death and decay become inevitably horrible, and inevitably taboo. If you don't think so, ask yourself why the second grade doesn't get to tour the local mortuary along with the police department, the fire department, and the nearest McDonalds-one can imagine, or I can in my

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more morbid moments, the mortuary and McDonalds combined; the highlights of the

tour, of

course, would be a viewing of the McCorpse.

No, the funeral parlor is taboo. Morticians are modern priests, working their arcane

magic of

cosmetics and preservation in rooms that are clearly marked "off limits." Who washes

the

corpse's hair? Are the fingernails and toenails of the dear departed clipped one

final time? Is it

true that the dead are encoffined sans shoes? Who dresses them for their final star

turn in the

mortuary viewing room? How is a bullet hole plugged and concealed? How are

strangulation

bruises hidden?

The answers to all these questions are available, but they are not common knowledge.

And

if you try to make the answers part of your store of knowledge, people are going to

think you a

bit peculiar. I know; in the process of researching a forthcoming novel about a

father who tries

to bring his son back from the dead, I collected a stack of funeral literature a

foot high-and

any number of peculiar glances from folks who wondered why I was reading The

Funeral:

Vestige or Value?

But this is not to say that people don't have a certain occasional interest in what

lies behind

the locked door in the basement of the mortuary, or what may transpire in the local graveyard

after the mourners have left . . . or at the dark of the moon. The Body Snatcher is not really a

tale of the supernatural, nor was it pitched that way to its audience; it was pitched as a film (as

was that notorious sixties documentary Mondo Cane) that would take us "beyond the pale,"

over that line which marks the edge of taboo ground.

"Cemeteries raided, children slain for bodies to dissect!" the movie poster drooled.

"Unthinkable realities and unbelievable FACTS of the dark days of early surgical research

EXPOSED in THE MOST DARING SHRIEK-AND-SHUDDER SHOCK SENSATION EVER BROUGHT TO THE SCREEN!" (All of this printed on a leaning tombstone.)

But the poster does not stop there; it goes on very specifically to mark out the exact location

of the taboo line and to suggest that not everyone may be adventurous enough to transgress

this forbidden ground: "If You Can 'Take It' See GRAVES RAIDED! COFFINS ROBBED!

CORPSES CARVED! MIDNIGHT MURDER! BODY BLACKMAIL! STALKING GHOULS! MAD

REVENGE! MACABRE MYSTERY! And Don't Say We Didn't Warn You!"

All of it has sort of a pleasant, alliterative ring, doesn't it?

2

These "areas of unease"-the political-social-cultural and those of the more mythic,

fairytale variety-have a tendency to overlap, of course; a good horror picture will put the pressure on at as many points as it can. *They Came from Within*, for instance, is about sexual promiscuity on one level; on another level it's asking you how you'd like to have a leech jump out of a letter slot and fasten itself onto your face. These are not the same areas of unease at all.

But since we're on the subject of death and decay, we might look at a couple of

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films where

this particular area of unease has been used well. The prime example, of course, is

Night of

the Living Dead, where our horror of these final states is exploited to a point

where many

audiences found the film well-nigh unbearable. Other taboos are also broken by the

film: at

one point a little girl kills her mother with a garden trowel . . . and then begins

to eat her. How's

that for taboo-breaking? Yet the film circles around to its starting-point again and

again, and

the key word in the film's title is not living but dead.

At an early point, the film's female lead, who has barely escaped being killed by a

zombie in

a graveyard where she and her brother have come to put flowers on their dead mother's grave

(the brother is not so lucky), stumbles into a lonely farmhouse. As she explores, she hears

something dripping . . . dripping . . . dripping. She goes upstairs, sees something, screams . . .

and the camera zooms in on the rotting, weeks-old head of a corpse. It is a shocking,

memorable moment. Later, a government official tells the watching, beleaguered populace

that, although they may not like it (i.e., they will have to cross that taboo line to do it), they must

burn their dead; simply soak them with gasoline and light them up. Later still, a local sheriff

expresses our own uneasy shock at having come so far over the taboo line. He answers a

reporter's question by saying, "Ah, they're dead . . . they're all messed up."

The good horror director must have a clear sense of where the taboo line lies, if he is not to

lapse into unconscious absurdity, and a gut understanding of what the countryside is like on

the far side of it. In *Night of the Living Dead*, George Romero plays a number of instruments,

and he plays them like a virtuoso. A lot has been made of this film's graphic violence, but one

of the film's most frightening moments comes near the climax, when the heroine's brother

makes his reappearance, still wearing his driving gloves and clutching for his sister with the

idiotic, implacable single-mindedness of the hungry dead. The film is violent, as is its sequel,

Dawn of the Dead-but the violence has its own logic, and I submit to you that in the horror

genre, logic goes a long way toward proving morality.

The crowning horror in Hitchcock's Psycho comes when Vera Miles touches that chair in the

cellar and it spins lazily around to reveal Norman's mother at last-a wizened, shriveled corpse

from which hollow eyesockets stare up blankly. She is not only dead; she has been stuffed like

one of the birds which decorate Norman's office. Norman's subsequent entrance in dress and

makeup is almost an anticlimax.

In AIP's The Pit and the Pendulum we see another facet of the bad death-perhaps the absolute worst. Vincent Price and his cohorts break into a tomb through its

brickwork, using

pick and shovel. They discover that the lady, his late wife, has indeed been buried alive; for

just a moment the camera shows us her tortured face, frozen in a rictus of terror,

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her bulging

eyes, her clawlike fingers, the skin stretched tight and gray. Following the Hammer

films, this

becomes, I think, the most important moment in the post-1960 horror film, signaling

a return to

an all-out effort to terrify the audience . . . and a willingness to use any means

at hand to do it.

Other examples abound. No vampire movie can be complete without a midnight creep

through the tombstones and the jimmying of a crypt door. The John Badham remake of

Dracula has disappointingly few fine moments, but one rather good sequence occurs

when

Van Helsing (Laurence Olivier) discovers his daughter Mina's grave empty . . . and

an opening

at its bottom leading deeper into the earth.* This is English

*Van Helsing's daughter? I hear you saying with justifiable dismay. Yes indeed.

Readers familiar with Stoker's

novel will see that Badham's film (and the stage play from which it was drawn) has

run any number of changes

on the novel. In terms of the tale's interior logic, these changes of plot and

relationship seem to work, but to what

purpose? The changes don't cause Badham to say anything new about either the Count

or the vampire myth in

general, and to my mind there was no coherent reason for them at all. As we have to

far too often, we can only

shrug and say, "That's showbiz."

mining country, and we're told that the hillside where the cemetery has been laid out is honeycombed with old tunnels. Van Helsing nevertheless descends, and the movie's best passage follows-crawling, claustrophobic, and reminiscent of that classic Henry Kuttner story, "The Graveyard Rats." Van Helsing pauses at a pool for a moment, and his daughter's voice comes from behind him, begging for a kiss. Her eyes glitter unnaturally; she is still dressed in the cerements of the grave. Her flesh has decayed to a sick green color and she stands, swaying, in this passage under the earth like something from a painting of the Apocalypse. In this one moment Badham has not merely asked us to cross the taboo line with him; he has quite literally pushed us across it and into the arms of this rotting corpse-a corpse made more horrible because in life it conformed so perfectly to those conventional American standards of beauty: youth and health. It's only a moment, and the movie holds no other moment comparable to it, but it is a fine effect while it lasts.

3

"Thou shall not read the Bible for its prose," W. H. Auden says in one of his own finer moments, and I hope I can avoid a similar flaw in this informal little discussion of

horror

movies. For the next little while, I intend to discuss several groups of films from the period

1950-1980, concentrating on some of those liaison points already discussed. We will discuss

some of those movies which seem to speak in their subtexts to our more concrete fears

(social, economic, cultural, political), and then some of those which seem to express universal

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fears which cut across all cultures, changing only slightly from place to place.

Later we'll

examine some books and stories in about the same way . . . but hopefully we can go on from

there together and appreciate some of the books and movies in this wonderful genre just for

themselves-for what they are rather than for what they do. We'll try not to cut the goose open

to see how it laid the golden eggs (a surgical crime which you can lay at the door of every high

school English teacher and college English prof that ever put you to sleep in class) or to read

the Bible for its prose.

Analysis is a wonderful tool in matters of intellectual appreciation, but if I start

talking about

the cultural ethos of Roger Corman or the social implications of *The Day Mars*

Invaded the

Earth, you have my cheerful permission to pop this book into a mailer, return it to

the publisher,

and demand your money back. In other words, when the shit starts getting too deep, I

intend to

leave the area rather than perform in accepted English-teacher fashion and pull on a

pair of

hip-waders.

Onward.

4

There are any number of places where we could begin our discussion of "real" fears,

but just

for the fun of it, let's begin with something fairly off the wall: the horror movie

as economic

nightmare.

Fiction is full of economic horror stories, although very few of them are

supernatural; The

Crash of '79 comes to mind, as well as *The Money Wolves*, *The Big Company Look*, and

the

wonderful Frank Norris novel, *McTeague*. I only want to discuss one movie in this

context, The

Amityville Horror. There may be others, but this one example will serve, I think, to

illustrate

another idea: that the horror genre is extremely limber, extremely adaptable,

extremely useful;

the author or filmmaker can use it as a crowbar to lever open locked doors or as a

small, slim

pick to tease the tumblers into giving. The genre can thus be used to open almost

any lock on

the fears which lie behind the door, and *The Amityville Horror* is a

dollars-and-cents case in

point.

There may be someone in some backwater of America who doesn't know that this film,

starring James Brolin and Margot Kidder, is supposedly based on a true story (set

down in a

book of the same name by the late Jay Anson). I say "supposedly" because there have

been

several cries of "hoax!" in the news media since the book was published, and these

cries have

been renewed since the movie was released-and almost unanimously panned by the

critics.

Despite the critics, *The Amityville Horror* went serenely on to become one of 1979's

top-grossing movies.

If it's all the same to you, I'd just as soon not go into the story's validity or

nonvalidity here,

although I hold definite views on the subject. Within the context of our discussion,

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whether the

Lutzes' house was really haunted or whether the whole thing was a put-up job matters very little. All movies, after all, are pure fiction, even the true ones. The fine film version of Joseph Wambaugh's *The Onion Field* begins with a title card which reads simply *This is a True Story*, but it's not; the very medium fictionalizes, and there is no way to stop this from happening. We know that a police officer named Ian Campbell really was killed in that onion field, and we know that his partner, Karl Hettinger, escaped; if we have doubts, let us look it up in the library and stare at the cold print there on the screen of the microfilm reader. Let us look at the police photographs of Campbell's body; let us talk to the witnesses. And yet we know there were no cameras there, grinding away, when those two small-time hoods blew Ian Campbell away, nor was there a camera present when Hettinger began hooking things from department stores and removing them from the premises via armpit express. Movies produce fiction as a byproduct the same way that boiling water produces steam . . . or as horror movies produce art.

If we were going to discuss the book version of *The Amityville Horror* (we're not, so

relax) it

would be important for us to first decide if we were talking about a fiction or a nonfiction work.

But as far as the movie is concerned, it just doesn't matter; either way it's fiction.

So let us see The Amityville Horror only as a story, unmodified either by "true" or "make-believe." It is simple and straightforward, as most horror tales are. The

Lutzes, a young

married couple with two or three kids (Cathy Lutz's by a previous marriage), buy a house in

Amityville. Previous to their tenancy, a young man has murdered his whole family at the

direction of "voices." For this reason, the Lutzes get the house cheap. But it wouldn't have

been cheap at half the price, they soon discover, because the house is haunted.

Manifestations include black goop that comes bubbling out of the toilets (and before the

festivities are over, it comes oozing out of the walls and the stairs as well), a roomful of flies, a

rocking chair that rocks by itself, and something in the cellar that causes the dog to dig

everlastingly at the wall. A window crashes on the little boy's fingers. The little girl develops an

"invisible friend" who is apparently really there. Eyes glow outside the window at three in the

morning. And so on.

Worst of all, from the audience's standpoint, Lutz himself (James Brolin) apparently falls out

of love with his wife (Margot Kidder) and begins to develop a meaningful relationship with his

ax. Before things are done, we are drawn to the inescapable conclusion that he is tuning up for

something more than splitting wood.

It's probably bad form for a writer to recant something he's already written, but

I'm going to

nevertheless. I did an article on movies for Rolling Stone in late 1979, and I now

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think I was

needlessly hard on The Amityville Horror in that piece. I called it a stupid sort of story, which it

is; I called it simplistic and transparent, which it also is (David Chute, a film critic for The

Boston Phoenix, quite rightly called it "The Amityville Nonsense"), but these canards really

miss the point, and as a lifelong horror fan, I should have known it. Stupid, simplistic, and

transparent are also perfectly good words to describe the tale of The Hook, but that doesn't

change the fact that the story is an enduring classic of its kind-in fact, those words probably

go a long way toward explaining why it is a classic of its kind.

Stripped of its distracting elements (a puking nun, Rod Steiger shamelessly

overacting as a

priest who is just discovering the devil after forty years or so as a man of the

cloth, and Margot

Kidder-not too tacky!-doing calisthenics in a pair of bikini panties and one white

stocking),

The Amityville Horror is a perfect example of the Tale to be Told around the

Campfire. All the

teller really has to do is to keep the catalogue of inexplicable events in their

correct order, so

that unease escalates into outright fear. If this is done, the story will do its

work . . . just as the

bread will rise if the yeast is added at the right moment to ingredients which are

at the correct

temperature.

I don't think I realized how well the film was working on this level until I saw it

for the second

time at a small theater in western Maine. There was little laughter during the film,

no hooting . .

. and not much screaming, either. The audience did not seem to be just watching this

film; it

seemed to be studying it. The audience simply sat there in a kind of absorbed

silence, taking it

all in. When the lights went on at the end of the film, I saw that the audience was

a much older

one than I am accustomed to see at horror films; I'd put the average age between

thirtyeight

and forty-two. And there was a light on their faces-an excitement, a glow. Leaving,

they

discussed the film animatedly with one another. It was this reaction-which seemed to

me

markedly peculiar in terms of what the film had to offer-that started me thinking

that a

reevaluation of the film was in order.

Two things apply here: first, The Amityville Horror allows people to touch the

unknown in a

simple, uncomplicated way; it is as effective in this way as other "fads" have been

before it,

beginning, let us say, with the hypnosis/ reincarnation vogue that followed The

Search for

Bridey Murphy and encompassing the flying-saucer flaps of the fifties, sixties, and

seventies;

Raymond Moody's Life After Life; and a lively interest in such wild talents as

telepathy,

precognition, and the various colorful pronouncements of Castenada's Don Juan.

Simplicity

may not always make great artistic sense, but it often makes the greatest impact on

minds

which have little imaginative capacity or upon minds in which the imaginative

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capability has

been little exercised. The Amityville Horror is the primal haunted house story . . .

and haunted

houses are a concept which even the dumbest mind has surely turned over at one time

or

another, if only around a childhood campfire or two.

Before going on to the second point (and I promise not to belabor you much more with

The

Amityville Horror), let's look at a section of a review of a 1974 horror film, Phase

IV. Phase IV

was a modest Paramount release starring Nigel Davenport and Michael Murphy. It dealt

with

ants taking over the world following a burst of solar radiation that made them

smart-an idea

perhaps inspired by science fiction writer Poul Anderson's short novel, Brain Wave,

and then

cross-pollinated with the 1954 picture Them! Both Them! and Phase IV share the same

desert

setting, although Them! shifts to the storm drains of Los Angeles for its slambang

climax. It

should be added that, similar settings or not, the two movies are a million miles

away from

each other in matters of tone and mood. The review of Phase IV I want to quote from

was

written by Paul Roen and published in Castle of Frankenstein, #24.

It's heartening to learn that Saul Bass, the imaginative graphics artist who designed the

opening titles for Hitchcock's three greatest thrillers, has himself now taken to directing

suspense movies. His initial enterprise is Phase IV, a blend of '50s sci-fi and '70s eco-disaster survival The narrative isn't always developed with logic and coherence,

but Phase is, nevertheless, a grueling suspense exercise. Davenport is a delight to watch;

his cool detachment crumbles by degrees, while his mellifluous British accent remains

dignified throughout Bass's visuals are as sophisticated as one might expect, though

often luridly colored; amber and green predominate [sic] the production.

This was the sort of fairly sophisticated reviewing one learned to expect from Castle of

Frankenstein, the best of the "monster mags" and one that died much too soon. The point the

review makes is that here we have a horror movie which stands in direct contrast to The

Amityville Horror. Bass's ants aren't even big. They're just little buggers who have all decided

to pull together. The movie did no great box-office business, and I finally caught it at the

drive-in back in 1976, filling out the bottom half of a double bill with a picture

that was much

inferior to it.

If you're a genuine horror fan, you develop the same sort of sophistication that a follower of

the ballet develops; you get a feeling for the depth and texture of the genre. Your ear develops

with your eye, and the sound of quality always comes through to the keen ear. There is fine

Waterford crystal, which rings delicately when struck, no matter how thick and chunky it may

look; and then there are Flintstone jelly glasses. You can drink your Dom Perignon out of either

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one, but friends, there is a difference.

Anyway, Phase IV did poorly at the box office because for all those people out there who

are not fans, who find it hard to suspend their disbelief, not much appears to be happening.

There are no "big moments," such as Linda Blair puking pea soup on Max von Sydow in The

Exorcist . . . or James Brolin dreaming that he is axing his family to death in The Amityville

Horror. But as Roen points out, a person who loves the genre's genuine Waterford (and there

isn't enough of it . . . but then, there never is enough of the good stuff in any field, is there?)

find a great deal happening in Phase IV-that delicate ring of the real stuff is there, it can be

perceived; it ranges from the music to the silent and eerie desert vistas to Bass's fluid camera

and Michael Murphy's quiet, understated narration. The ear detects that true ringing sound . . .

and the heart responds.

I said all of that to say this: the opposite also applies. The ear which is constantly attuned to

the "fine" sound-the decorous strains of chamber music, for instance-may hear nothing but

horrid cacophony when exposed to bluegrass fiddle . . . but bluegrass music is mighty fine all

the same. The point is that the fan of movies in general and horror movies in particular may

find it easy-too easy-to overlook the crude charms of a film like The Amityville Horror after

he or she has experienced films such as Repulsion, The Haunting, Fahrenheit 451 (which may

have seemed to be science fiction to some, but which is nevertheless a reader's nightmare), or

Phase IV. In a real appreciation of horror films, a taste for junk food applies . . . an idea we'll

take up more fully in the next chapter. For now, let it suffice to say that the fan

loses his taste

for junk food at his or her own peril, and when I hear by way of the grapevine that

New York

film audiences are laughing at a horror movie, I rush out to see it. In most cases I

am

disappointed, but every now and then I hear me some mighty good bluegrass fiddle,

eat me

some pretty good fried chicken, and get so excited that I mix me some metaphors, as

I've done

here.

All of which brings us around to the real watchspring of The Amityville Horror, and

the

reason it works as well as it does: the picture's subtext is one of economic unease,

and this is

a theme that director Stuart Rosenberg plays on constantly. In terms of the

times-18-percent

inflation, mortgage rates out of sight, gasoline selling at a cool dollar forty a

gallon-The

Amityville Horror, like The Exorcist, could not have come along at a more opportune

moment.

This comes out most clearly in a scene which is the film's only moment of true and

honest

drama; a brief little vignette that breaks through the clouds of hokum like a sunray

on a drizzly

afternoon. The Lutz family is preparing to go to the wedding of Cathy Lutz's younger

brother

(who looks, in the film, as if he might be all of seventeen). They are, of course,

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in the Bad

House when the scene takes place. The younger brother has lost the fifteen hundred dollars

that is due the caterer, and he is in an understandable agony of panic and embarrassment.

Brolin says he'll write a covering check, which he does, and later he stands off the angry

caterer, who has specified only cash, in a halfwhispered washroom argument while the wedding party whoops it up outside. After the wedding, Lutz turns the living room of the Bad

House upside down looking for the lost money, which has now become his money, and the

only way of backing up the bank paper he has issued the caterer. Brolin's check may not have

been 100 percent Goodyear rubber, but in his sunken, purple-pouched eyes we see a man

who didn't really have the money any more than his hapless brother-in-law did, regardless.

Here is a man tottering on the brink of his own financial crash. He finds the only trace under

the couch: a bank money-band with the numerals \$500 stamped on it. The band lies there on

the rug, tauntingly empty. "Where is it?" Brolin screams, his voice vibrating with anger, frustration, and fear. At that one moment we hear the ring of Waterford, clear and true-or, if you like, we hear that one quiet phrase of pure music in a film that is otherwise all crash and bash.

Everything which *The Amityville Horror* does well is summed up in that scene. Its implications touch on everything about the Bad House's most obvious effect-and also the only one which seems empirically undeniable: little by little, it is ruining the Lutz family financially.

The movie might as well have been subtitled *The Horror of the Shrinking Bank Account*. It's the more prosaic fallout of the place where so many haunted-house stories start. "It's on the market for a song," the realtor says with a big egg-sucking grin. "It's supposed to be haunted."

Well, the house that the Lutzes buy is indeed on the market for a song (and there's another good moment-all too short-when Cathy tells her husband that she will be the first person in her large Catholic family to actually own her own home; "We've always been renters," she says), but it ends up costing them dear. At the conclusion, the house seems to

literally tear

itself apart. Windows crash in, black goop comes dribbling out of the walls, the
cellar stairs

cave in . . . and I found myself wondering not if the Lutz clan would get out alive
but if they had

adequate homeowner's insurance.

Here is a movie for every woman who ever wept over a plugged-up toilet or a
spreading

water stain on the ceiling from the upstairs shower; for every man who ever did a
slow burn

when the weight of the snow caused his gutters to give way; for every child who ever
jammed

his fingers and felt that the door or window which did the jamming was out to get
him. As

horror goes, Amityville is pretty pedestrian. So's beer, but you can get drunk on
it.

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"Think of the bills," a woman sitting behind me in the theater moaned at one point .

. . but I

suspect it was her own bills she was thinking about. It was impossible to make a
silk purse out

of this particular sow's ear, but Rosenberg at least manages to give us Qiana, and
the main

reason that people went to see it, I think, is that The Amityville Horror, beneath
its ghost-story

exterior, is really a financial demolition derby.

Think of the bills, indeed.

5

The horror film as political polemic, then.

We've mentioned a couple of films of this stripe already- Earth vs. the Flying

Saucers and

the Siegel version of Invasion of the Body Snatchers, both from the fifties. All the

best films of

this political type seem to come from that period-although we may be coming full

circle again;

The Changeling, which at this writing seems on its way to become the

big "sleeper" of the spring of 1980, is an odd combination of ghosts and Watergate.

If movies are the dreams of the mass culture-one film critic, in fact, has called

watching a

movie "dreaming with one's eyes open"-and if horror movies are the nightmares of the

mass

culture, then many of these fifties horrors express America's coming-to-terms with

the

possibility of nuclear annihilation over political differences.

We ought to eliminate the horror movies of that period that sprang from

technological

unease (the so-called "big bug" movies are among these) and also those "nuclear

showdown"

movies such as Fail-Safe and Ray Milland's intermittently interesting Panic in the

Year Zero.

These movies are not political in the sense that Siegel's *Invasion of the Body*

Snatchers is

political; that was a film where you could see the political enemy of your choice

around every

corner, symbolized in those ominous pods from space.

The political horror films of the period we're discussing here begin, I think, with

The Thing

(1951), directed by Christian Nyby and produced by Howard Hawks (who also had a hand

in

the direction, one suspects). It starred Margaret Sheridan, Kenneth Tobey, and James

Arness

as the blood-drinking human carrot from Planet X.

Briefly: A polar encampment of soldiers and scientists discovers a strong magnetic

field

emanating from an area where there has been a recent meteor fall; the field is

strong enough

to throw all their electronic gadgets and gizmos off whack. Further, a camera

designed to start

shooting pictures when and if the normal radiation background count suddenly goes up

has

taken photos of an object which dips, swoops, and turns at high speeds-strange

behavior for

a meteor.

An expedition is dispatched to the spot, and it discovers a flying saucer buried in

the ice.

The saucer, superhot on touchdown, melted its way into the ice, which then refroze,

leaving

only the tailfin sticking out (thus relieving the special-effects corps of a

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potentially big-budget

item). The Army guys, who demonstrate frostbite of the brain throughout most of the

film,

promptly destroy the extraterrestrial ship while trying to burn it out of the ice

with thermite.

The occupant (Arness) is saved, however, and carted back to the experimental station

in a

block of ice. He/it is placed in a storage shed, under guard. One of the guards is

so freaked out

by the Thing that he throws a blanket over it. Unlucky man! Quite obviously all his

good stars

are in retrograde, his biorhythms low, and his mental magnetic poles temporarily

reversed. The

blanket he's used is of the electric variety, and it miraculously melts the ice

without shorting

out. The Thing escapes, and the fun begins.

The fun ends about sixty minutes later with the creature being roasted medium-rare

on an

electric sidewalk sort of thing that the scientists have set up. A reporter on the

scene reports

the news of humankind's first victory over invaders from space to a presumably

grateful world,

and the film fades out, like *The Blob* seven years later, not with a THE END title card, but with a question mark.

The Thing is a small movie (in *An Illustrated History of the Horror Film*, Carlos Clarens quite rightly calls it "intimate") done on a low budget and as obviously done "on-set" as Lewton's *The Cat People*. Like *Alien*, which would come more than a quarter-century later, it achieves its best effects from feelings of claustrophobia and xenophobia, both of them feelings we're saving for those films with mythic, "fairy-tale" subtexts,* but as pointed out before, the best horror movies will try to get at you on many different levels, and *The Thing* is also operating on a political level. It has grim things to say about eggheads (and knee-jerk

*Some would say that feelings of xenophobia are in themselves political, and there's an argument there to be made-but I would rather discuss it as a universal feeling, which I believe it to be, and exclude it (for now, at least) from the sort of subliminal propaganda we're discussing here.

liberals; in the early fifties you could have put an equals sign between the two) who would indulge in the crime of appeasement.

The very presence of Kenneth Tobey and his squad of soldiers gives the film a

militaristic,
and thus political, patina. We're never under any illusions that this Arctic base
has been set up
just for the eggheads, who want to study such useless things as the aurora borealis
and the
formation of glaciers. No, this base is also spending the taxpayers' money in
important ways: it
is a part of the Distant Early Warning line, part of America's Vigilant and
Unceasing Etc., Etc.,
Etc. In the chain of command, the scientists are very much under Tobey. After all,
the film
whispers to the audience, we know what these ivory-tower eggheads are like, don't
we? Full of
big ideas but not worth much in a situation calling for a practical man. Really, it

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says, when you
get right down to it, those bigdome ideas make most scientists as responsible as a
child with a
box of matches. They may be great with their microscopes and telescopes, but it
takes a man
like Kenneth Tobey to understand about America's Vigilant and Unceasing Etc., Etc.,
Etc.
The Thing is the first movie of the fifties to offer us the scientist in the role of
the Appeaser,

that creature who for reasons either craven or misguided, would open the gates to the Garden of Eden and let all the evils fly in (as opposed, let us say, to those Mad Labs proprietors of the thirties, who were more than willing to open Pandora's Box and let all the evils fly out-a major distinction, although the end results are the same). That scientists should be so constantly vilified in the techno-horror films of the fifties-a decade that was apparently dedicated to the idea of turning out a whole marching corps of men and women in white lab coats-is perhaps not so surprising when we remember that it was science which opened those same gates so that the atomic bomb could be brought into Eden-first by itself and then trundled on missile carriers. The average Jane or Joe on the street during those spooky eight or nine years that followed the surrender of Japan had extremely schizoid feelings about science and scientistsrecognizing the need for them and at the same time loathing the things they had let in forever.

On the one hand, there was their pal, that neat little all-around guy, Reddy Kilowatt; on the other hand, before getting into the first reel of The Thing down at your local theater, you could

watch newsreel footage as an Army mockup of a town just like yours was vaporized in
a
nuclear furnace.

Robert Cornthwaite plays the Appeasing Scientist in *The Thing*, and we hear from his
lips

the first verse of a psalm that any filmgoer who grew up in the fifties and sixties
became

familiar with very quickly: "We must preserve this creature for science." The second
verse

goes, "If it comes from a society more advanced than ours, it must come in peace. If
we can

only establish communications with it, and find out what it wants-"

Only scientists, Cornthwaite says, are capable of studying this creature from
another world,

and it must be studied; it must be debriefed; we gotta find out what heats up his
rocket tubes.

Never mind the fact that the creature has exhibited nothing but murderous
tendencies, laying

low a couple of huskies (it loses a hand in the process, but not to worry, it grows
back) and

living on blood instead of Green Thumb Plant Food.

Twice, near the film's conclusion, Cornthwaite is hauled away by soldiers; at the
climax, he

breaks free of his guards and faces the creature with his hands open and empty. He
begs it to

communicate with him and to see that he means it no harm. The creature stares at him
for a

long, pregnant moment . . . and then bats him casually aside, as you or I might swat

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a

mosquito. The medium-rare roasting on the electric sidewalk follows.

Now I'm only a journeyman writer and I will not presume to teach history here (too
much like

trying to teach your grammy to suck eggs). I will point out that the Americans of
that time were

perhaps more paranoid about the idea of "appeasement" than at any other time before
or

since. The dreadful humiliation of Neville Chamberlain and England's resulting close
squeak at

the beginning of Hitler's war was still very much with those Americans, and why not?

It had all

happened only twelve years prior to The Thing's release, and even Americans who were
just

turning twenty-one in 1951 could remember it all very clearly. The moral was
simple-such

appeasement doesn't work; you gotta cut 'em if they stand and shoot 'em if they run.

Otherwise, they'll take you over a bite at a time (and in the case of The Thing, you
could take

that literally). The Chamberlain lesson to Americans of the early fifties was that
there can be no

peace at any price, and never appeasement. Although the Korean police action would mark

the beginning of the end for the idea, in 1951 the idea of America as world

policeman (a kind of

international Clancy growling. "Whaddye think yes doin' there, boyo?" at such

geopolitical

burglars as North Korea) was still quite respectable, and many Americans undoubtedly

saw

the idea in even stronger terms: the United States not just as policeman, but as the

gunslinger

of the free world, the Texas Ranger who had pushed his way into the brawling saloon

of

Asian/European politics in 1941 and who had cleaned house in a mere three and a half

years.

So that moment comes in *The Thing* when Cornthwaite faces the creature-and is slammed

roughly aside. It is a purely political moment, and audiences applauded the

creature's

destruction fervently when it came moments later. In the confrontation between

Cornthwaite

and the hulking Arness, there is a subtext which suggests Chamberlain and Hitler; in

the

destruction of the creature moments later by Tobey and his soldiers, audiences may

have

seen (and applauded) the quick, nonsense destruction of their favorite

geopolitical villain-

North Korea perhaps; more likely the dastardly Russians, who had so quickly replaced Hitler

as the man in the black hat.

If all this seems much too heavy a cargo for a modest little fright flick like The Thing to bear,

please remind yourself that a man's point of view is shaped by the events he experiences, and

that a man's politics are shaped by his point of view. I am only suggesting that, given the

political temper of the times and the cataclysmic world events which had occurred only a few

years before, the viewpoint of this movie is almost preordained. What do you do with a

blood-drinking carrot from outer space? Simple. Cut him if he stands and shoot him if he runs.

And if you're an Appeasing Scientist like Robert Cornthwaite (with a yellow streak up your back

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as wide as the no-passing line on a highway, that subtext whispers), you simply get bulldozed

under.

Carlos Clarens points out how remarkably the creature of this film resembles

Universal's

Frankenstein monster from twenty years before, but there is really nothing so remarkable

about it, surely; this particular card from the Tarot should be familiar to us by
now, and if it's
not, the title helpfully informs us that we're again dealing with the Thing Without
a Name. It
perhaps strikes more modern viewers as strange that a creature intelligent enough to
conquer
space should be presented in the film as an out-and-out monster (as opposed, let us
say, to
the saucerians in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, who speak English with a moderate
warble but
with the grammatical poise of an Oxford don; Hawks's Thing can only grunt like a pig
getting its
back scratched with a wire brush). One wonders why he came to Earth at all. My own
suspicion is that he/it got off-course and that the original plan was for him to
seed all of
Nebraska or perhaps the Nile delta with little bits of himself. Just think-a
home-grown invasion
force (get in their way and they kill you, but smoke them and . . . real mellow,
man-oooh, the
colors!).
Yet even this is not much of an inconsistency when we put ourselves into the temper
of the
times again. The people of those times saw both Hitler and Stalin as creatures
possessed of a
certain low animal cunning-Hitler, after all, was first with the jet fighter and the

offensive

missile. But they were animals for all that, mouthing political ideas that were

little more than

grunts. Hitler grunted in German; Stalin in Russian, but a grunt is a grunt, for all

that. And

perhaps the creature in *The Thing* is saying something, after all, which is perfectly

harmless-

"The people of my star system wish to know if the Get Out of Jail Free card may be

sold to

another player," perhaps-but it sounds bad. Real bad.

By contrast, consider the other end of this telescope. The children of World War II

produced

The Thing; twenty-six years later a child of Vietnam and the self-proclaimed Love

Generation,

Steven Spielberg, gives us a fitting balance weight to *The Thing* in a film called

Close

Encounters of the Third Kind. In 1951, the soldier standing sentry duty (the one who

has

foolishly covered the block of ice in which the Thing has been entombed with an

electric

blanket, you will remember) empties his automatic into the alien when he hears it

coming; in

1977, a young guy with a happy, spaced-out smile holds up a sign reading STOP AND BE

FRIENDLY. Somewhere in between the two, John Foster Dulles evolved into Henry

Kissinger,

and the pugnacious politics of confrontation became détente.

In The Thing, Kenneth Tobey occupies himself with building an electric boardwalk to kill the creature; in Close Encounters, Richard Dreyfuss occupies himself with building a mock-up of Devil's Tower, the creatures' landing place, in his living room. And he would be just as happy,

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danse macabre Stephen King we feel, to run around up there placing those landing lights. The Thing is a big, hulking brute; the creatures from the stars in Spielberg's film are small, delicate, childlike. They do not speak, but their mothership plays lovely harmonic tones-the music of the spheres, we assume. And Dreyfuss, far from wanting to murder these emissaries from space, goes with them. I'm not saying that Spielberg is or would think of himself as a member of the Love Generation simply because he came to his majority while students were putting daisies in the muzzles of M-1's and while Hendrix and Joplin were playing the Fillmore West. Neither am I saying that Howard Hawks, Christian Nyby, Charles Lederer (who wrote the screenplay for The Thing), or John W. Campbell (whose novella formed the basis for the film) fought their way up the beaches of Anzio or helped to raise the Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima. But

events

determine point of view and point of view determines politics, and CE3K seems to me every bit

as preordained as *The Thing*. We can understand that the latter's "let the military handle this"

thesis was a perfectly acceptable one in 1951, because the military had handled the Japs and

the Nazis perfectly well in Duke Wayne's "Big One," and we can also understand that the

former's attitude of "don't let the military handle this" was a perfectly acceptable one in 1977,

following the military's less-than-startling record in Vietnam, or even in 1980

(when CE3K was

rereleased with additional footage), the year when American military personnel lost the battle

for our hostages to the Iranians following three hours of mechanical fuckups.

Political horror films are by no means common, but other examples come to mind. The

hawkish ones, like *The Thing*, usually extol the virtues of preparedness and deplore the vices

of laxness, and achieve a goodly amount of their horror by positing a society which is politically

antithetical to ours and yet possesses a great deal of power-either technological or magical, it

matters not which; as Arthur C. Clarke has pointed out, when you reach a certain point, there

is absolutely no difference between the two. There is a wonderful moment near the

beginning of

George Pal's adaptation of The War of the Worlds when three men, one of whom is

waving a

white flag, approach the first of the alien spacecraft to land. Each of the three

appears to come

from a different class and a different race, but they are united, not just by their

common

humanity, but by a pervasive sense of Americanness which I don't believe was

accidental. As

they approach the smoking crater with their white flag, they evoke that

Revolutionary War

image we all grew up in school with: the drummer, the fifer, the flag-bearer. Thus

their

destruction by the Martians' heat ray becomes a symbolic act, calling up all the

ideals

Americans have ever fought for.

The film 1984 makes a similar statement, only here (the film being largely stripped

of the

rich resonance George Orwell brought to his novel) Big Brother has replaced the

Martians.

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In the Charlton Heston film The Omega Man (adapted from what David Chute calls

"Richard

Matheson's tough-minded, peculiarly practical vampire novel I Am Legend"), we see

exactly

the same sort of thing; the vampires become almost cartoon Gestapo agents in their black

clothes and their sunglasses. Ironically, an earlier film version of that same novel (The Last

Man on Earth, starring Vincent Price in a rare nonvillain role as Matheson's Robert Neville)

proposes a political idea which raises a different sort of horror. This film is more faithful to

Matheson's novel, and as a result it offers a subtext which tells us that politics themselves are

not immutable, that times change, and that Neville's very success as a vampire-hunter (his

peculiarly practical success, to paraphrase Chute), has turned him into the monster, the

outlaw, the Gestapo agent who strikes at the helpless as they sleep. For a nation whose

political nightmares perhaps still include visions of Kent State and My Lai, this is a particularly

apt idea. The Last Man on Earth is perhaps an example of the ultimate political horror film,

because it offers us the Walt Kelly thesis: We have met the enemy and he is us.

All of which brings us to an interesting borderline that I want to point out but not step over this

is the point at which the country of the horror film touches the country of the black comedy.

Stanley Kubrick has been a resident of this borderline area for quite some time. A perfectly good case could be made for classing Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* as a political horror film without monsters (a guy needs a dime to phone Washington and stop World War III before it can get started; Keenan Wynn grudgingly obliges by blowing a Coke machine to smithereens with his burpgun so our hero can get at the change; but he tells this would-be savior of the human race that "you're going to have to answer to the Coca-Cola Company of America for this"); for *A Clockwork Orange* as a political horror film with human monsters (Malcolm McDowell stomping a hapless passerby to the tune of "Singin' in the Rain"); and for *2001: A Space Odyssey* as a political horror film with an inhuman monster ("Please don't turn me off," the murderous computer HAL 9000 begs as the Jupiter probe's one remaining crewman pulls its memory modules one by one) that ends its cybernetic life by singing "A Bicycle Built for Two." Kubrick has consistently been the only American film director to understand that stepping over the borderline into taboo

country is as

often apt to cause wild laughter as it is horror, but any ten-year-old who ever

laughed

hysterically at a traveling-salesman joke would agree that it is so. Or it may

simply be that only

Kubrick has been smart enough (or brave enough) to go back to this country more than

once.

6

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"We have opened a door on an unimaginable power," the old scientists says gloomily

at the

conclusion of Them!, "and there will be no closing it now."

At the end of D. F. Jones's novel Colossus (filmed as The Forbin Project), the

computer

which has taken over everything tells Forbin, its creator, that people will do more

than learn to

accept its rule; they will come to accept it as a god. "Never!" Forbin responds in

ringing tones

that would do the hero of a Robert Heinlein space opera proud. But it is Jones

himself who has

the final word-and it's not a reassuring one. "Never?" reads the final paragraph of

his

cautionary tale. *

In the Richard Egan film Gog (directed by Mr. Flipper himself, Ivan Toss), the

equipment of

an entire space-research station seems to go mad. A solar mirror twirls erratically,
pursuing the
heroine with what amounts to a lethal heat ray; a centrifuge designed to test
would-be
astronauts for their responses to heavy g-loads speeds up until the two test
subjects are
literally accelerated to death; and at the conclusion, the two BEM-like robots, Gog
and Magog,
go totally out of control, snapping their Waldo-like pincers and making weird
Geiger-counter-like sounds as they roll forward on various errands of destruction
("I can control
him," the cold-fish scientist says confidently only moments before Magog crushes his
neck with
one of those pincers).

"We grow them big out here," the old Indian in Prophecy says complacently to Robert
Foxworth and Talia Shire as a tadpole as big as a

*D. F. Jones could hardly be classed as the Pollyanna of the science fiction world;
in his followup to Colossus,
a newly developed birth control pill that you only have to take once results in
worldwide sterility and the slow
death of the human race. Cheery stuff, but Jones is not alone in his gloomy distrust
of a technological world; there
is J. G. Ballard, author of such grim tales as Crash, Concrete Island, and
High-Rise; not to mention Kurt
Vonnegut, Jr. (whom my wife fondly calls "Father Kurt"), who has given us such

novels as *Cat's Cradle* and

Player Piano.

salmon jumps out of a lake in northern Maine and flops around on the shore. Indeed they do;

Foxworth also sees a salmon as big as a porpoise, and by the conclusion of the film, one is

grateful that whales are not fresh-water mammals.

All of the foregoing are examples of the horror film with a technological subtext .

. .

sometimes referred to as the "nature run amok" sort of horror picture (not that there's much

natural about Gog and Magog, with their tractor treads and their forests of radio aerials). In all

of them, it is mankind and mankind's technology which must bear the blame; "You brought it

on yourselves," they all say; a fitting epitaph for the mass grave of mankind, I think, when the

big balloon finally goes up and the ICBMs start to fly.

In *Them!* it is nuclear testing at White Sands that has produced the giant ants; the Cold War

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has spawned dat ole binary debbil Colossus; ditto the machines that have gone nuts in Gog;

and it's mercury in the water, a side-effect of a paper-making process, that has produced the

giant tadpoles and the mutant monstrosities in the John Frankenheimer film *Prophecy*.

It is here, in the techno-horror film, that we really strike the mother lode. No

more panning

for the occasional nugget, as in the case of the economic horror film or the

political horror film;

pard, we could dig the gold right out of the ground with our bare hands here, if we

wanted to.

Here is a corner of the old horror-film corral where even such an abysmal little wet

fart of a

picture as *The Horror of Party Beach* will yield a technological aspect upon

analysis-you see,

all those beach blanket boppers in their bikinis and ball-huggers are being menaced

by

monsters that were created when drums of radioactive waste leaked. But not to worry;

although a few girls get carved up, all comes right in the end in time for one last

wiener roast

before school starts again.

Once more, these things happen only rarely because directors, writers, and producers

want

them to happen; they happen on their own. The producers of *The Horror of Party*

Beach, for

example, were two Connecticut drive-in owners who saw a chance to turn a quick buck

in the

low-budget horror-movie game (the reasoning seeming to be that if Nicholson and

Arkoff of

AIP could make X amount of dollars churning out B-pictures, then they might be able to make X2 amount of dollars by turning out Z-pictures). The fact that they created a film which foresaw a problem that would become very real ten years down the road was only an accident . . . but an accident, like Three Mile Island, that perhaps had to happen, sooner or later. I find it quite amusing that this grainy, low-budget rock 'n' roll horror picture arrived at ground zero with its Geiger counters clicking long before The China Syndrome was even a twinkle in anyone's eye. By now it must be obvious that all of these circles intersect, that sooner or later we always arrive back at the same terminus-the terminus which gives upon the land of the mass American nightmare. These are nightmares for profit, granted, but nightmares is nightmares, and in the last analysis it is the profit motive that becomes unimportant and the nightmare itself which remains of interest. The producers of The Horror of Party Beach never sat down, I'm sure (just as I'm sure the producers of The China Syndrome did), and said to each other: "Look-we're going to warn the people of America about the dangers of nuclear reactors, and we will sugar-coat the pill of

this vital message with an entertaining story line." No, the line of discussion would have been more apt to go like this: Because our target audience is young, we'll feature young people, and because our target audience is interested in sex, we'll site it on a sun-and-surf-type beach, which allows us to show all the flesh the censors will allow. And because our target audience

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danse macabre Stephen King likes grue, we'll give them these gross monsters. It must have looked like boffo box-office stuff: a hybrid of AIP's most consistently lucrative genre pictures-the monster movie and the beach-party movie. But because any horror film (with the possible exception of the German expressionist films of the 1930s) has got to at least pay lip service to credibility, there had to be some reason for these monsters to suddenly come out of the ocean and start doing all these antisocial things (one of the film's highlights-maybe lowlights would be better-comes when the creatures invade a slumber party and kill ten or twenty nubile young things . . . talk about party -poopers!). What

the producers decided upon was nuclear waste, leaking from those dumped canisters.

I'm

sure it was one of the least important points in their preproduction discussions,

and for that

very reason it becomes very important to our discussions here.

The reason for the monsters most likely came about in a kind of freeassociation

process, the

sort of test psychiatrists use to discover points of anxiety in their patients. And

although The

Horror of Party Beach has long since been consigned to oblivion, that image of the

canisters

marked with radiation symbols sinking slowly to the bottom of the ocean lingers in

the memory.

What in Christ's name are we really doing with all that nuclear sludge? the mind

enquires

uneasily-the burnoff, the dreck, the used plutonium slugs, and the worn-out parts

that are as

hot as a nickelplated revolver and apt to stay that way for the next six hundred

years or so?

Does anybody know what in Christ's name we're doing with those things?

Any thoughtful consideration of techno-horror films-those films whose subtexts

suggest

that we have been betrayed by our own machines and processes of mass

production-reveals

very quickly another face in that dark Tarot hand we dealt out earlier: this time

it's the face of

the Werewolf. In talking about the Werewolf in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde I used the terms

Apollonian (to suggest reason and the power of the mind) and Dionysian (to suggest emotion,

sensuality, and chaotic action). Most films which express technological fears have a similar

dual nature. Grasshoppers, Beginning of the End suggests, are Apollonian creatures, going

about their business of hopping, eating, spitting tobacco juice, and making little grasshoppers.

But following an infusion of nuclear wolfsbane, they grow to the size of Cadillacs, become

Dionysian and disruptive, and attack Chicago. It is their very Dionysian tendencies-in this

case, their sex drive-that spells the end for them. Peter Graves

(as the Brave Young Scientist) rigs up a mating-call tape that is broadcast through loudspeakers from a number of boats circling on Lake

Michigan, and the grasshoppers all rush to their deaths, believing themselves to be on their

way to a really good fuck. A bit of a cautionary tale, you understand. I bet D. F.

Jones loved it.

Even Night of the Living Dead has a techno-horror aspect, a fact that

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may be overlooked as the zombies move in on the lonely Pennsylvania farmhouse where

the

"good guys" are holed up. There is nothing really supernatural about all those dead folks

getting up and walking; it hap

pened because a space probe to Venus picked up some weird corpse-reviving radiation on its

way back home. One suspects that chunks of

such a satellite would be eagerly sought-after artifacts in Palm Springs and Fort Lauderdale.

The barometer effect of the subtexts of techno-horror films can be seen by comparing films

of this type from the fifties, sixties, and seventies. In the fifties, the terror of the Bomb and of

fallout was a real and terrifying thing, and it left a scar on those children who wanted to be

good just as the depression of the thirties left a scar on their elders. A newer generation-now

still teenagers, with no memory of either the Cuban missile crisis or of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas, raised on the milk of détente-may find it hard to comprehend the

terror of these things, but they will undoubtedly have a chance to discover it in the years of

tightening belts and heightening tensions which lie ahead . . . and the movies will be there to

give their vague fears concrete focusing points in the horror movies yet to come.

It may be that nothing in the world is so hard to comprehend as a terror whose time

has

come and gone-which may be why parents can scold their children for their fear of

the

boogeyman, when as children themselves they had to cope with exactly the same fears

(and

the same sympathetic but uncomprehending parents). That may be why one generation's

nightmare becomes the next generation's sociology, and even those who have walked

through

the fire have trouble remembering exactly what those burning coals felt like.

I can remember, for instance, that in 1968, when I was twenty-one, the issue of long

hair

was an extremely nasty, extremely explosive one. That seems as hard to believe now

as the

idea of people killing each other over whether the sun went around the earth or the

earth went

around the sun, but that happened, too.

I was thrown out of a bar called the Stardust in Brewer, Maine, by a construction

worker

back in that happy year of 1968. The guy had muscles on his muscles and told me I

could

come back and finish my beer "after you get a haircut, you faggot fairy." There were

the

standard catcalls thrown from passing cars (usually old cars with fins and cancer of

the rocker

panels) : Are you a boy or are you a girl? Do you give head, honey? When was the

last time

you had a bath? And so on, as Father Kurt so rightly says.

I can remember such things in an intellectual, even analytical way, as I can

remember

having a dressing that had actually grown into the tissue yanked from the site of a

cyst-removal operation that occurred when I was twelve. I screamed from the pain and

then

fainted dead away. I can remember the pulling sensation as the gauze tore free of

the new,

healthy tissue (the dressing removal was performed by a nurse's aide who apparently

had no

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idea what she was doing), I can remember the scream, and I can remember the faint.

What I

can't remember is the pain itself. It's the same with the hair thing, and in a

larger sense, all the

other pains associated with coming of age in the decade of napalm and the Nehru

jacket. I've

purposely avoided writing a novel with a 1960s' time setting because all of that

seems, like the

pulling of that surgical dressing, very distant to me now-almost as if it had

happened to

another person. But those things did happen; the hate, paranoia, and fear on both

sides were

all too real. If we doubt it, we only need re-view that quintessential sixties

counterculture horror

film, Easy Rider, where Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper end up being blown away by a couple

of rednecks in a pickup truck as Roger McGuinn sings Bob Dylan's "It's All Right, Ma (I'm Only

Bleeding) " on the soundtrack.

Similarly, it is difficult to remember in any gut way the fears that came with those boom

years of atomic technology twenty-five years ago. The technology itself was strictly Apollonian;

as Apollonian as nice-guy Larry Talbot, who "said his prayers at night." The atom was not split

by a gibbering Colin Clive or Boris Karloff in some Eastern European Mad Lab; it was not done

by alchemy and moonlight in the center of a rune-struck circle; it was done by a lot of little guys

at Oak Ridge and White Sands who wore tweed jackets and smoked Luckies, guys who worried about dandruff and psoriasis and whether or not they could afford a new car and how

to get rid of the goddam crabgrass on the lawn. Splitting the atom, producing fission, opening

that door on a new world that the old scientist speaks of at the end of Them!-these things

were accomplished on a business-as-usual basis.

People understood this and could live with it (fifties science books extolled the

wonderful

world the Friendly Atom would produce, a world refueled by nice safe nuclear reactors, and

grammar school kids got free comic books produced by the power companies), but they suspected and feared the hairy, simian face on the other side of the coin as well:

they feared

that the atom might be, for a number of reasons both technological and political, essentially

uncontrollable. These feelings of deep unease came out in movies such as *The Beginning of*

the End, *Them!*, *Tarantula*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (where radiation combined with a

pesticide causes a very personal horror for one man, Scott Carey), *The H-Men*, and *Four-D*

Man. The entire cycle reaches its supreme pinnacle of absurdity in *Night of the Lepus*, where

the world is menaced by sixty-foot bunnies.*

The concerns of the techno-horror films of the sixties and seventies change with the concerns of the people who lived through those times; the big bug movies give way to pictures

such as *The Forbin Project*

*And a host of others, many of them Japanese imports, all linked by either long-term radiation or nuclear blast

as first cause: *Godzilla*, *Gorgo*, *Rodan*, *Mothra*, and *Ghidrah*, the Three-Headed Monster. The idea was even

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played for laughs once before Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, in an odd little fifties

picture called The Atomic Kid,

starring Mickey Rooney.

(The Software that Conquered the World) and 2001, which both offer us the

possibility of the

computer as God, or the even nastier idea (ludicrously executed, I'll readily admit)

of the

computer as satyr, which is laboriously produced in Demon Seed and Saturn 3. In the

sixties,

horror proceeds from a vision of technology as an octopus-perhaps sentientburying us

alive in

red tape and information-retrieval systems which are terrible when they work (The

Forbin

Project) and even more terrible when they don't: In The Andromeda Strain, for

instance, a

small scrap of paper gets caught in the striker of a teletype machine, keeps the

bell from

ringing, and thereby (in a fashion Rube Goldberg certainly would have approved of)

nearly

causes the end of the world.

Finally there are the seventies, culminating in Frankenheimer's notvery-good but

certainly

well-meant film Prophecy, which is so strikingly similar to those fifties big bug

movies (only the

first cause has changed), and *The China Syndrome*, a horror movie which synthesizes all three of these major technological fears: fears of radiation, fears for the ecology, fears of the machinery gone out of control, run wild.

Before leaving this all too brief look at pictures which depend on some mass unease over matters technological to provide the equivalent of *The Hook* (pictures which appeal to the Luddite hiding inside all of us), we should mention some of the films dealing with space travel which fall into this category . . . but we'll exclude such xenophobic pictures as *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and *The Mysterians* from our view. Pictures which focus on the possible Dionysian side of space exploration (such as *The Andromeda Strain* and *Night of the Living Dead*, where satellites bring back dangerous but nonsentient organisms from the void) ought to be differentiated from those purely xenophobic movies dealing with invasion from outer space-films where the human race is viewed in an essentially passive role, attacked by the equivalent of muggers from the stars. In pictures of this type, technology is often seen as the savior (as it is in *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, where Hugh Marlowe uses his sonic

gun to

interrupt the saucers' electromagnetic drive, or in *The Thing*, where Tobey and his

men use

electricity to barbecue the interstellar vegetable)- Apollonian science vanquishing

the

Dionysian bad guys from Planet X.

Although both *The Andromeda Strain* and *Night of the Living Dead* present space travel

itself as an active danger, perhaps the best example of that idea combined with the

brilliant

mind dangerously hypnotized by the siren song of technology comes in *The Creeping*

Unknown, a film that predates both of the former. In that film, the first of the

critically acclaimed

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Quatermass series, the viewer is originally presented with one of the creepiest

locked-room

mysteries ever posited: three scientist-astronauts are sent into space, but only one

returns . . .

and he is catatonic. Telemetry and the presence of all three spacesuits seem to

prove that the

two missing spacemen never left the ship. So where did they go?

What happened, apparently, is that they picked up an interstellar hitchhiker, a plot

device we

see again in *It!* *The Terror from Beyond Space* and, of course, in *Alien*. This

hitchhiker has

consumed the survivor's two mates, leaving only a mass of sludgy gray stuff behind .

. . and, of

course, the hitchhiker (a kind of space spore) is now busily at work in the body of the survivor,

Victor Carune, who is played with skull-like, spooky believability by Richard Wordsworth. Poor

Carune ends up degenerating into a spongy, many-tentacled horror which is finally spotted

clinging to a scaffolding in Westminster Abbey and dispatched (just in the nick of time; it is

about to sporulate and create billions of these things) by a big jolt of electricity which sets it on

fire.

All of this is fairly standard monster-movie fare. What elevates The Creeping Unknown to

levels undreamed of in the philosophies of the creators of The Horror of Party Beach is Val

Guest's somber, atmospheric direction, and the character of Quatermass himself, played by

Brian Donlevy (other actors have since played Quatermass in other films, softening the

interpretation a bit). Quatermass is a scientist who may or may not be mad, depending on your

own views of technology. Certainly if he is nuts, there is enough Apollonian method in his

madness to make him every bit as scary (and every bit as dangerous) as that blob of

tentacle-waving goo that was once Victor Carune. "I'm a scientist, not a fortune-teller,"

Quatermass grunts contemptuously at a timid doctor who asks him what he thinks might happen next; when a fellow scientist tells him that if he tries to open the hatch of the crashed

rocket he will roast the space travelers inside, Quatermass storms at him: "Don't tell me what I can and can't do!"

His attitude toward Carune himself is the cold-blooded attitude which a biologist might adopt

toward a hamster or a Rhesus monkey. "He's coming along fine," Quatermass says of the

catatonic Carune, who is sitting in something which vaguely resembles a dentist's chair and

staring out at the world with eyes as black and dead as cinders coughed up from hell. "He

knows we're trying to help him."

Yet in the end it is Quatermass triumphant-if only through blind luck. After the monster is

destroyed, Quatermass brushes rudely by a police officer who is trying to tell him in a halting

way that he prayed they would be successful. "One world at a time is enough for me," the

policeman says; Quatermass ignores him.

At the door, his young assistant finds his way to him. "I only just heard, sir," he

says. "Is

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there anything I can do?"

"Yes, Morris," Quatermass replies. "I'm going to need some help."

"Help, sir?"

"Going to start again," Quatermass amplifies-it is the film's last line of dialogue.

It fades to

a scene of yet another rocket blasting off into outer space.

Guest seems ambivalent about his ending and about the character of Quatermass, and

it's

that ambivalence which gives this early Hammer film its resonance and real power.

Quatermass seems somehow closer to those very real Oak Ridge scientists of the

postwar

period than he does to the gibbering Mad Labs scientists of the thirties; he is no

Dr. Cyclops in

a white lab coat, chuckling evilly as he stares through his bottle-thick glasses at

his creations.

Au contraire, he is not only fairly good-looking and fearsomely intelligent, he is

charismatic and

impossible to turn from his purpose. If you are an optimist, you can see the coda of

The

Creeping Unknown as a testament to the glorious stubbornness of the human spirit,

its

determination to advance the store of knowledge at any cost. If, on the other hand,

you are a

pessimist, then Quatermass becomes the ultimate symbol of mankind's built-in limiting factor, and the high priest of the techno-horror film. The return of his first manned space probe has almost resulted in the end of the human race; Quatermass's response to this niggling little reversal is to launch another as quickly as he can. Foot-dragging politicians are apparently no match for the man's charisma, and as we see that rocket going up at the end of the picture, we're left with a question: What will this one bring back?

Even such a much-loved American institution as the motor vehicle has not entirely escaped the troubled dreams of Hollywood; a few years before being run out of his mortgaged house in Amityville, James Brolin had to face the terrors of *The Car* (1977), a customized something-or-other that looked like a squatty airport limo from one of hell's used-car lots. The movie degenerates into a ho-hum piece of hackwork before the end of the second reel (the sort of movie where you can safely go out for a popcorn refill at certain intervals because you know the car isn't going to strike again for ten minutes or so), but there is a marvelous opening sequence where the car chases two bicyclists through Utah's Zion State Park, its

horn blating

arrhythmically as it gains on them and finally runs them down. There's something working in

that opening sequence, something that calls up a deep, almost primitive un-ease about the

cars we zip ourselves up in, thereby becoming anonymous . . . and perhaps homicidal.

A better film is the Steven Spielberg adaptation of Richard Matheson's short story Duel, a

film which originally appeared as part of ABC's Movie of the Week series and went on to

become something of a cult film. In this film, a psychotic trucker in a big ten-wheeler pursues

Dennis Weaver over what seems to be at least a million miles of California highways.

We

never actually see the trucker (although we do see a beefy arm cocked out of the cab window

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once, and at another point we see a pair of pointy-toed cowboy boots on the far side of the

truck), and ultimately it is the truck itself, with its huge wheels, its dirty windshield like an idiot's

stare, and its somehow hungry bumpers, which becomes the monster-and when Weaver is finally able to lead it to an embankment and lure it over the edge, the noise of its "death"

becomes a series of chilling Jurassic roars . . . the sound, we think, a

tyrannosaurus rex would

make going slowly down into a tar pit. And Weaver's response is that of any

self-respecting

caveman: he screams, shrieks, cuts capers, literally dances for joy. Duel is a

gripping, almost

painfully suspenseful rocket ride of a movie; perhaps not Spielberg's best work-that

must

almost certainly wait for the eighties and nineties-but surely one of the half

-dozen best

movies ever made for TV.

We could uncover other interesting tales of automotive horror, but they would be

stories and

novels, mostly; such turkeys as Death Race 2000 and Mad Max hardly count. Modern

Hollywood has apparently decided that, as the day of the privately owned gasoline

vehicle

enters its late afternoon, the automobile in most cases must be reserved for funny

car chases

(as in Foul Play and the cheerfully mind-crogling Grand Theft Auto) or a kind of

sappy

reverence (The Driver). The interested reader might enjoy an anthology (now

available in

paperback) edited by Bill Pronzini and titled Car Sinister. Fritz Leiber's

contribution alone, a

funny/sinister tale of Car Future titled "X Marks the Pedwalk," is worth the price

of admission.

Social horror films.

We've already discussed a few films with social implications-pimples and the heartbreak of psoriasis in the fifties, not to mention Michael Landon drooling shaving cream all over his high school jacket. But there have been other films which tackle more serious social subjects. In some cases (Rollerball, Wild in the Streets), these films feature a logical or satirical extrapolation of current social trends and thus become science fiction. We'll restrict these, if you don't mind, on the grounds that they constitute another dance-a bit different from this dark cotillion we're currently engaged in.

There have been a few films which have tried to walk the borderline between horror and social satire; one of those which seems to me to tread this borderline most successfully is The Stepford Wives. The film is based on the novel by Ira Levin, and Levin has actually been able to pull this difficult trick off twice, the other case being that of Rosemary's Baby, which we'll talk about in some depth when we finally arrive at our discussion of the horror novel.

For now we'll stick to The Stepford Wives, which has some witty things to say about Women's

Liberation,

and some disquieting things to say about the American male's response to it.

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I spent some time trying to decide if the film, directed by Bryan Forbes and

starring

Katharine Ross and Paula Prentiss, really belonged in this book. It is as satiric as

the best of

Kubrick's work (although a good deal less elegant), and I defy an audience not to

laugh when

Ross and Prentiss step into the home of a neighbor (he's the local druggist, and a

Walter Mitty

type if ever there was one) and hear his wife moaning upstairs: "Oh, Frank, you're

the greatest

. . . Frank, you're the best . . . you're the champ . . .*

The original Levin story avoided the label "horror novel" (something like the label

"pariah

dog" in the more exalted circles of literary criticism) because most critics saw it

as Levin's sly

poke at the Women's Movement. But the scarier implications of Levin's jape are not

directed at

women at all; they are aimed unerringly at those men who consider it only their due

to leave for

the golf course on Saturday morning after breakfast has been served them and to

reappear

(loaded, more likely than not) in time for their dinner to be served them.

I'm including it here-as social horror rather than social satire-because the film,

after some

uneasy backing and filling where it seems unsure of just what it does want to

be-becomes

just that: a social horror story.

*But the credit for this particular scene belongs to neither Forbes nor Levin, but

with the film's screenwriter,

William Goldman, who is a very funny fellow. If you doubt, see his wonderful send-up

of fantasy and fairy tales,

The Princess Bride. I can think of no other satire, with the possible exception of

Alice in Wonderland, which is so

clearly an expression of love and humor and good temper.

Katharine Ross and her husband (played by Peter Masterson) move from New York City

to

Stepford, a Connecticut suburb, because they feel it will be better for the

children, and

themselves as well. Stepford is a perfect little village where kids wait

good-humoredly for the

school bus, where you can see two or three fellows washing their cars on any given

day,

where (you feel) the yearly United Fund quota is not only met but exceeded.

Yet there's a strangeness in Stepford. A lot of the wives seem a little . . . well,

spacey.

Pretty, always attired in flowing dresses that are almost gowns (a place where the

movie slips,

I think; as a labeling device, it's pretty crude. These women might as well be wearing stickers pasted to their foreheads which read I AM ONE OF THE WEIRD STEPFORD WIVES), they all drive station wagons, discuss housework with an inordinate degree of enthusiasm, and seem to spend any spare time at the supermarket.

One of the Stepford wives (one of the weird ones) cracks her head in a minor parking lot fender-bender; later we see her at a lawn party, repeating over and over again: "I simply must get that recipe . . . I simply must get that recipe . . . I simply must . . ." The secret of Stepford comes clear immediately. Freud, in a tone which sounds suspiciously like despair, asked:

"Woman . . . what does she want?" Forbes and company ask the opposite question, and

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danse macabre Stephen King come up with a stinging answer. Men, the film says, do not want women; they want robots with sex organs.

There are several funny scenes in the movie (besides the aforementioned "Frank, you're the champ" sequence); my own favorite comes when, at a women's "bitch session" Ross and Prentiss have arranged, the weird Stepford wives begin discussing cleaning products

and

laundry soaps with a slow and yet earnest intensity; everyone seems to have walked right out

of one of those commercials male Madison Avenue execs sometimes refer to as "Two C's in a

K"-meaning two cunts in a kitchen.

But the movie waltzes slowly out of this brightly lit room of social satire and into a darker

chamber by far. We feel the ring closing, first around Paula Prentiss, then around Katharine

Ross. There is an uncomfortable passage when the artist who apparently creates the features

for the robots sits sketching Ross, his eyes looking up from the sketch pad at her and then

back down again; there is the smirking expression on the face of Tina Louise's husband as the

bulldozer rips up the surface of her tennis court in preparation for the pool he always wanted;

there is Ross discovering her husband sitting alone in the living room of their new house, a

drink in his hand, weeping. She is deeply concerned, but we know that his shallow tears mean

only that he has sold her out for a dummy with micro-chips in her head. Very soon she will lose

all her interest in photography.

The movie reserves its ultimate horror and its most telling social shot for the

closing

moments of the film, when the "new" Katharine Ross walks in on the old one . . .

perhaps, we

think, to murder her. Under her flowing negligée which might have come from

Frederick's of

Hollywood, we see Ms. Ross's rather small breasts built up to the size of what men

discussing

women over beers sometimes refer to as "knockers." And of course, they are no longer

the

woman's breasts at all; they now belong solely to her husband. The dummy is not

quite

complete, however; there are two horrible black pools where the eyes should be. Bad

enough,

and more spectacular, probably, but it was the import of those siliconeswollen

breasts that

chilled me. The best social horror movies achieve their effect by implication, and

The Stepford

Wives, by showing us only the surface of things and never troubling to explain

exactly how

these things are done, implies plenty.

I'll not bore you by rehashing the plot of William Friedkin's The Exorcist, another

film which

relies on the unease generated by changing mores; I'll simply assume that if your

interest in

the genre has been sufficient to sustain you this far, then you've probably seen it.

If the late fifties and early sixties were the curtain-raiser on the generation gap

("Is it a boy or

a girl?" etc., etc., etc.), then the seven years from 1966 to 1972 were the play

itself. Little

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Richard, who had horrified parents in 1957 when he leaped atop his piano and began

boogieing on it in his lizardskin loafers, looked tame next to John Lennon, who was

proclaiming that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus-a statement that set off a

rash of

fundamentalist record-burnings. The Brylcreem look was replaced by those long locks

already

discussed. Parents began to find strange herbs in their sons' and daughters' bureau

drawers.

The images in rock music had become increasingly distressing: Mr. Tambourine Man

seemed

to be about drugs; with the Byrds' Eight Miles High there could be no question.

Radio stations

continued to play discs by one group even after two male band members announced they

were in love with each other. Elton John proclaimed his AC/DC sexual proclivities

and

continued successful; yet less than twenty years before, wildman Jerry Lee Lewis was

blackballed from AM airplay when he married his fourteen-year-old cousin.

Then there was the war in Vietnam. Messrs. Johnson and Nixon spread it out like a

great

big rancid picnic lunch over there in Asia. Many of the young elected not to attend.

"I got no
quarrel with them Congs," Muhammed Ali announced, and was stripped of his boxing
title for
declining to take off his gloves and pick up an M-1. Kids began burning their draft
cards,
running away to Canada or Sweden, and marching with Viet Cong flags. In Bangor,
where I
hung out in my college days, a young man was arrested and incarcerated for replacing
the
seat of his Levis with an American flag. Some fun, huh, kid.
It was more than a generation gap. The two generations seemed, like the San Andreas
fault,
to be moving along opposing plates of social and cultural conscience, commitment,
and
definitions of civilized behavior itself. The result was not so much an earthquake
as it was a
timequake. And with all of this young vs. old nuttiness as a backdrop, Friedkin's
film of The
Exorcist appeared and became a social phenomenon in itself. Lines stretched around
the
block in every major city where it played, and even in towns which normally rolled
up their
sidewalks promptly at 7:30 P.M., midnight shows were scheduled. Church groups
picketed;
sociologists with pipes pontificated; newscasters did "back of the book" segments

for their

programs on slow nights. The country, in fact, went on a two-month possession jag.

The movie (and the novel) is nominally about the attempts of two priests to cast a demon

out of young Regan MacNeil, a pretty little subteen played by Linda Blair (who later went on to

a High Noon showdown with a bathroom plunger in the infamous NBC movie Born Innocent).

Substantatively, however, it is a film about explosive social change, a finely honed focusing

point for that entire youth explosion that took place in the late sixties and early seventies. It

was a movie for all those parents who felt, in a kind of agony and terror, that they were losing

their children and could not understand why or how it was happening. It's the face of the

Werewolf again, a Jekyll-and-Hyde tale in which sweet, lovely and loving Regan turns

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into a

foul-talking monster strapped into her bed and croaking (in the voice of Mercedes

McCambridge) such charming homilies as "You're going to let Jesus fuck you, fuck you, fuck

you." Religious trappings aside, every adult in America understood what the film's powerful

subtext was saying; they understood that the demon in Regan MacNeil would have

responded

enthusiastically to the Fish Cheer at Woodstock.

A Warner Brothers executive told me recently that movie surveys show the average filmgoer to be fifteen years of age, which may be the biggest reason why the movies so often

seem afflicted with a terminal case of arrested development. For every film like

Julia or The

Turning Point, there are a dozen like Roller Boogie and If You Don't Stop It, You'll Go Blind.

But it is worth noting that when the infrequent blockbusters which every film producer hopes for

finally come along-pictures like Star Wars, Jaws, American Graffiti, The Godfather, Gone With

the Wind, and of course The Exorcist-they always break the demographic hammerlock which

is the enemy of intelligent filmmaking. It is comparatively rare for horror movies to do this, but

The Exorcist is a case in point (and we have already spoken of The Amityville Horror, another

film which has enjoyed a surprisingly old audience).

A film which appealed directly to the fifteen-year-olds that provide the spike point for

movie-going audiences-and one with a subtext tailored to match-was the Brian De Palma

adaptation of my novel Carrie. While I believe that both the book and the film

depend on

largely the same social situations to provide a text and subtext of horror, there's

maybe enough

difference to make a few interesting observations on De Palma's film version.

Both novel and movie have a pleasant High School Confidential feel, and while there are

some superficial changes from the book in the film (Carrie's mother, for instance, seems to be

presented in the film as a kind of weird renegade Roman Catholic), the basic story skeleton is

pretty much the same. The story deals with a girl named Carrie White, the browbeaten daughter of a religious fanatic. Because of her strange clothes and shy mannerisms, Carrie is

the butt of every class joke; the social outsider in every situation. She also has a mild

telekinetic ability which intensifies after her first menstrual period, and she finally uses this

power to "bring down the house" following a terrible social disaster at her high school prom.

De Palma's approach to the material was lighter and more deft than my own-and a good deal more artistic; the book tries to deal with the loneliness of one girl, her desperate effort to

become a part of the peer society in which she must exist, and how her effort fails.

If it had any

thesis to offer, this deliberate updating of High School Confidential, it was that high school is a

place of almost bottomless conservatism and bigotry, a place where the adolescents who attend are no more allowed to rise "above their station" than a Hindu would be allowed to rise above his or her caste.

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But there's a little more subtext to the book than that, I think-at least, I hope so. If The

Stepford Wives concerns itself with what men want from women, then Carrie is largely about

how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's

sexuality . . . which is only to say that, writing the book in 1973 and only out of college three

years, I was fully aware of what Women's Liberation implied for me and others of my sex. The

book is, in its more adult implications, an uneasy masculine shrinking from a future of female

equality. For me, Carrie White is a sadly misused teenager, an example of the sort of person

whose spirit is so often broken for good in that pit of man- and woman-eaters that is your

normal suburban high school. But she's also Woman, feeling her powers for the first time and,

like Samson, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight at the end of the book.

Heavy, turgid stuff-but in the novel, it's only there if you want to take it. If you don't, that's

okay with me. A subtext only works well if it's unobtrusive (in that I perhaps succeeded too

well; in her review of De Palma's film, Pauline Kael dismissed my novel as "an unassuming

potboiler"-as depressing a description as one could imagine, but not completely inaccurate).

De Palma's film is up to more ambitious things. As in *The Stepford Wives*, humor and horror

exist side by side in *Carrie*, playing off one another, and it is only as the film nears its

conclusion that horror takes over completely. We see Billy Nolan (well played by John

Travolta) giving the cops a big aw-shucks grin as he hides a beer against his crotch early on; it

is a moment reminiscent of *American Graffiti*. Not long after, however, we see him swinging a

sledgehammer at the head of a pig in a stockyard-the aw-shucks grin has crossed the line

into madness, somehow, and that line-crossing is what the film as a whole is about.

We see three boys (one of them the film's nominal hero, played by William Katt) trying on

tuxedos for the Prom in a kind of *Gas House Kids* routine that includes Donald Duck talk and

speeded-up action. We see the girls who have humiliated Carrie in the shower room by throwing tampons and sanitary napkins at her doing penance on the exercise field to tootling, lumbering music which is reminiscent of "Baby Elephant Walk." And yet beyond all these sophomoric and mildly amusing high school cut-ups, we sense a vacuous, almost unfocused hate, the almost unplanned revenge upon a girl who is trying to rise above her station. Much of De Palma's film is surprisingly jolly, but we sense his jocoseness is dangerous; behind it lurks the aw-shucks grin becoming a frozen rictus, and the girls laboring over their calisthenics were the same girls shouting, "Plug it up, plug it up, plug it up!" at Carrie not long before. Most of all, there is that bucket of pig's blood poised on the beam above the place where Carrie and Tommy (Katt) will eventually be crowned . . . only waiting its time. De Palma is sly, and extremely adept at handling his mostly female cast. In writing the

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danse macabre Stephen King novel, I found myself slogging grimly toward the conclusion, trying to do the best job I could with what I knew about women (which was not a great deal). The strain shows in the

finished

book. It's a fast and entertaining read, I think, and (for me at least) quite

gripping. But there's a

certain heaviness there that a really good popular novel should not have, a feeling

of Sturm

and Drang that I could not get rid of no matter how hard I tried. The book seems

clear enough

and truthful enough in terms of the characters and their actions, but it lacks the

style of De

Palma's film.

The book attempts to look at the ant farm of high school society dead on; De Palma's

examination of this High School Confidential world is more oblique . . . and more

cutting. The

film came along at a time when movie critics were bewailing the fact that there were

no movies

being made with good, meaty roles for women in them . . . but none of these critics

seem to

have noticed that in its film incarnation, Carrie belongs almost entirely to the

ladies. Billy Nolan,

a major-and frightening-character in the book, has been reduced to a semisupporting

role in

the movie. Tommy, the boy who takes Carrie to the Prom, is presented in the novel as

a boy

who is honestly trying to do something manly-in his own way he is trying to opt out

of the

caste system. In the film he becomes little more than his girlfriend's cat's-paw,

her tool of

atonement for her part in the shower room scene where Carrie is pelted with sanitary napkins.

"I don't go around with anyone I don't want to," Tommy said patiently. "I'm asking because I want to ask you." Ultimately, he knew this to be the truth.

In the film, however, when Carrie asks Tommy why he is favoring her with an invitation to

the Prom, he offers her a dizzy sun 'n' surf grin and says, "Because you liked my poem."

Which, by the way, his girlfriend wrote.

The novel views high school in a fairly common way: as that pit of man- and woman-eaters

already mentioned. De Palma's social stance is more original; he sees this suburban white

kids' high school as a kind of matriarchy. No matter where you look, there are girls behind the

scenes, pulling invisible wires, rigging elections, using their boyfriends as stalking horses.

Against such a backdrop, Carrie becomes doubly pitiful, because she is unable to do any of

these things-she can only wait to be saved or damned by the actions of others. Her only power

is her telekinetic ability, and both book and movie eventually arrive at the same point: Carrie

uses her "wild talent" to pull down the whole rotten society. And one reason for the success of

the story in both print and film, I think, lies in this: Carrie's revenge is something that any

student who ever had his gym shorts pulled down in Phys Ed or his glasses thumbbrubbed in

study hall could approve of. In Carrie's destruction of the gym (and her destructive
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walk back

home in the book, a sequence left out of the movie because of tight budgeting) we see a

dream revolution of the socially downtrodden.

8

Once upon a time there dwelt on the outskirts of a large forest a poor woodcutter with his

wife and two children; the boy was called Hansel and the girl Grettel. He had always had

little enough to live on, and once, when there was a great famine in the land, he couldn't

even provide them with daily bread. One night, as he was tossing about in his bed, full of

cares and worry, he sighed and said to his wife: "What's to become of us? how are we to

support our poor children, now that we have nothing more for ourselves?" "I'll tell you what,

husband," answered the woman, "early tomorrow morning we'll take the children into the
thickest part of the wood; there we shall light a fire for them and give them each a
piece of
bread; then we'll go on to our work and leave them alone. They won't be able to find
their
way home and we shall thus be rid of them . . ."*

Previous to now, we have been discussing horror movies with subtexts which try to
link real
(if sometimes free-floating) anxieties to the nightmare fears of the horror film.

But now, with this
invocation from "Hansel and Grettel," that most cautionary of nursery tales, let us
put out even
this dim light of rationality and discuss a few of those films whose effects go
considerably
deeper, past the rational and into those fears which seem universal.

*From The Andrew Lang Fairy Tale Treasury, edited by Cary Wilkins (New York: Avenel
Books, 1979), p. 91.

Here is where we cross into the taboo lands for sure, and it's best that I be frank
with you up
front. I think that we're all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums only
hide it a little
better-and maybe not all that much better, after all. We've all known people who
talk to
themselves; people who sometimes squinch their faces into horrible grimaces when

they

believe no one is watching; people who have some hysterical fear-of snakes, the

dark, the

tight place, the long drop . . . and, of course, those final worms and grubs that

are waiting so

patiently underground to play their part in the great Thanksgiving table of life:

what once ate

must eventually be eaten.

When we pay our four or five bucks and seat ourselves at tenth-row center in a

theater

showing a horror movie, we are daring the nightmare.

Why? Some of the reasons are simple and obvious. To show that we can, that we are

not

afraid, that we can ride this roller coaster. Which is not to say that a really good

horror movie

may not surprise a scream out of us at some point, the way we may scream when the

roller

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coaster twists through a complete three-sixty or ploughs through a lake at the

bottom of the

drop. And horror movies, like roller coasters, have always been the special province

of the

young; by the time one turns forty or fifty, one's appetite for double-twists or

360° loops may be

considerably depleted.

As pointed out, we also go to reestablish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in *Die, Monster, Die!* confirms for us that, no matter how far vie may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness.

And we go to have fun.

Ah, but this is where the ground starts to slope away, isn't it? Because this is a very peculiar sort of fun indeed. The fun comes from seeing others menaced-sometimes killed. One critic has suggested that if pro football has become the voyeur's version of combat, then the horror film has become the modern version of the public lynching.

It is true that the mythic, "fairy-tale" horror film intends to take away the shades of gray (which is one reason why *When a Stranger Calls* doesn't work; the psycho, well and honestly played by Tony Beckley, is a poor shmuck beset by the miseries of his own psychoses; our unwilling sympathy for him dilutes the film's success as surely as water dilutes Scotch); it urges us to put away our more civilized and adult penchant for analysis and to become

children

again, seeing things in pure blacks and pure whites. It may be that horror movies

provide

psychic relief on this level because this invitation to lapse into simplicity, and

even outright

madness is extended so rarely. We are told we may allow our emotions a free rein . .

. or no

rein at all.

If we are all insane, then all insanity becomes a matter of degree. If your insanity

leads you

to carve up women like Jack the Ripper or the Cleveland Torso Murderer, we clap you

away in

the funny farm (except neither of those two amateur-night surgeons were ever caught,

heh-heh-heh) ; if, on the other hand, your insanity leads you only to talk to

yourself when

you're under stress or to pick your nose on your morning bus, then you are left

alone to go

about your business . . . although it's doubtful that you will ever be invited to

the best parties.

The potential lyncher is in almost all of us (I exclude saints, past and present,

but then, most

or all saints have been crazy in their own ways), and every now and then he has to

be let loose

to scream and roll around on the grass By God, I do believe I'm talking

Werewolf again.

Our emotions and our fears form their own body, and we recognize that it demands its

own

exercise to maintain proper muscle tone. Certain of these emotional "muscles" are accepted-even exalted -in civilized society; they are, of course, the emotions which tend to

maintain the status quo of civilization itself. Love, friendship, loyalty,

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kindness-these are all the

emotions which we applaud, emotions which have been immortalized in the bad couplets of

Hallmark Cards and in the verses (I don't dare call it poetry) of Leonard Nimoy.

When we exhibit these emotions, society showers us with positive reinforcement; we learn

this even before we get out of diapers. When, as children, we hug our rotten little puke of a

sister and give her a kiss, all the aunts and uncles smile and twit and cry, "Isn't he the sweetest

little thing?" Such coveted treats as chocolate-covered graham crackers often follow. But if we

deliberately slam the rotten little puke of a sister's fingers in the door, sanctions follow-angry

remonstrance from parents, aunts, and uncles; instead of a chocolate-covered graham cracker, a spanking.

But anticivilization emotions don't go away, and they demand periodic exercise. We have

such "sick" jokes as, "What's the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of dead babies?" (You can't unload a truckload of bowling balls with a pitchfork . . . a joke, by the way, which I heard originally from a ten-year-old.) Such a joke may surprise a laugh or a grin out of us even as we recoil, a possibility which confirms the thesis: if we share a Brotherhood of Man, then we also share an Insanity of Man. None of which is intended as a defense of either the sick joke or insanity, but merely as an explanation of why the best horror films, like the best fairy tales, manage to be reactionary, anarchistic, and revolutionary all at the same time.

My agent, Kirby McCauley, likes to relate a scene from Andy Warhol's film *Bad*-and he relates it in the fond tones of the confirmed horror -movie buff. A mother throws her baby from the window of a skyscraper; we cut away to the crowd below and hear a loud splat. Another mother leads her son through the crowd and up to the mess (which is obviously a watermelon with the seeds removed), points to it, and says, to the effect, "That's what will happen to you if you're bad!" It's a sick joke, like the one about the truckload of dead babies-or the one about

the babes in the woods, which we call "Hansel and Gretel."

The mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all

that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest

fantasies realized . . . and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark. For these reasons, good

liberals often shy away from horror films. For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of

them-Dawn of the Dead, for instance-as lifting a trapdoor in the civilized forebrain and

throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean

river beneath.

Why bother? Because it keeps them from getting out, man. It keeps them down there and

me up here. It was Lennon and McCartney who said that all you need is love, and I would

agree with that. As long as you keep the gators fed.

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9

And now this word from the poet Kenneth Patchen. It comes from his small, clever book But

Even So

Come now,
my child,
if we were planning
to harm you, do you think
we'd be lurking here
beside the path
in the very darkest
part of
the forest?

This is the mood which the best films of mythic "fairy-tale horror" summon up in us,
and it
also suggests that, below the level of simple aggression and simple morbidity, there
is a final
level where the horror movie does its most powerful work. And that is well for us,
because
without more, the human imagination would be a poor, degraded thing, in need of no
more in
the way of horror than such things as Last House on the Left and Friday the 13th.
The horror
movie is planning to harm us, all right, and that is exactly why it is lurking here
in the very
darkest part of the forest. At this most basic level, the horror film isn't fooling
around: it wants to
get you. Once it has reduced you to a level of childlike expectation and point of
view, it will
begin playing one or more of a very few simple harmonic melodies-the greatest

limitation

(and therefore the greatest challenge) of the horror form is its very strictness.

The things that

really scare people on a gut level can be reduced like fractions to an irreducible handful. And

when that has finally happened, analyses such as those I've given in the foregoing pages

become impossible . . . and even if analysis were possible, it would be irrelevant.

One can

point out effect, and that must be the end of the matter. To try and go any further is as useless

as trying to divide a prime number by two and come out even. But effect may be enough; there

are films, like Browning's *Freaks*, that have the power to reduce us to jelly, to make us mutter

(or whimper) to ourselves, "Please let it stop"; they are those films which hold their spell over

us in spite of all we can do, even including the recitation of that most magic spell-breaking

incantation: "It's only a movie." And they can all be invoked with that wonderful fairy -tale

door-opener, "Once upon a time."

So, before we proceed any further, here's a little quiz for you. Get a scrap of paper and

something to write with and jot down your answers. Twenty questions; give yourself

five points

per question. And if you score below 70, you need to go back and do some postgraduate work

in the real fright films . . . the ones that scare us just because they scare us.

Ready? Okay. Name these films:

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1. Once upon a time, the husband, of the world's champion blind lady had to go away for

awhile (to slay a dragon, or something of that sort) and a wicked man named Harry Roat, who

came from Scarsdale, came by to see her while her husband was gone.

2. Once upon a time, three babysitters went out on Halloween night, and only one of them

was still alive come All Saints Day.

3. Once upon a time a lady who stole some money spent a not-so enchanted evening at an

out-of-the-way motel. Everything seemed pretty much okay until the motel owner's mother

came by; mother did something very naughty.

4. Once upon a time some bad people tampered with the oxygen line in one operating room

of a major hospital and a lot of people went to sleep for a long, long time-just like Snow

White. Only these people never woke up.

5. Once upon a time there was a sad girl who picked up men in bars, because when the

men came home with her, she didn't feel so sad. Except one night she picked up a man who

was wearing a mask. Underneath the mask he was the boogeyman.

6. Once upon a time some brave explorers landed on another planet to see if someone needed help. Nobody did, but by the time they got going again, they discovered that they had

picked up the boogeyman.

7. Once upon a time a sad lady named Eleanor went on an adventure in an enchanted castle. In the enchanted castle, Lady Eleanor was not so sad, because she found some new

friends. Except that the friends left, and she stayed . . . forever.

8. Once upon a time a young man tried to bring some magic dust from another country to

his own aboard a magic flying carpet. But he was caught before he could get on his magic

carpet, and the bad people took away his magic white powder and locked him in an evil
dungeon.

9. Once upon a time there was a little girl who looked sweet, but she was really very wicked.

She locked the janitor up in his room and set his highly flammable bed of wood-chips and
excelsior on fire because he was mean to her.

10. Once upon a time there were two little children, very much like Hansel and Gretel, in

fact, and when their father died, their mommy married a wicked man who pretended to be very good. This wicked man had LOVE tattooed on the fingers of one hand and HATE tattooed on the fingers of the other.

11. Once upon a time there was an American lady living in London whose sanity was under some question. She thought she saw a murder in the old boarded-up house next door.

12. Once upon a time a lady and her brother went to put flowers on their mother's grave and the brother, who liked to play mean tricks, scared her by saying, "They're coming to get you, Barbara." Except that it turned out they really were coming to get her . . . but they got him, first.

13. Once upon a time all the birds in the world got mad at the people and started to kill the people because the birds were under an evil spell.

14. Once upon a time a crazyman with an ax started to chop up his family, one by one, in an

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old Irish house. When he chopped off the groundskeeper's head, it rolled right down into the family pool-wasn't that funny?

15. Once upon a time two sisters grew old together in an enchanted castle in the Kingdom

of Hollywood. Once one of them had been famous in the Kingdom of Hollywood, but that was

long, long ago. The other one was stuck in a wheelchair. And do you know what happened?

The sister who could walk served her paralyzed sister a dead rat for dinner! Wasn't that funny?

16. Once upon a time there was a cemetery caretaker who discovered that if he put black

pins into the vacant plots on his cemetery map, the people who owned those plots would die.

But when he took out the black pins and put in white pins, do you know what happened? The

movie turned into a big pile of shit! Wasn't that funny?

17. Once upon a time a bad man stole the little princess and buried her alive . . . or at least,

he said he did.

18. Once upon a time there was a man who invented some magic eyedrops, and he could use them to see through people's cards in Las Vegas and make lots of money. He could also

see through girls' clothes at cocktail parties, which was maybe not such a nice thing to do, but

wait a minute. This man kept seeing more . . . and more . . . and more . . .

19. Once upon a time there was a lady who was saddled with Satan's child, and he knocked

her over a gallery railing with his trike. What a mean thing to do! But lucky mommy!

Because

she died soon after, she didn't have to do the sequel!

20. Once upon a time some friends went on a canoe trip down a magic river, and some

bad

men saw that they were having fun and decided to fix them for it. That was because

the bad

men didn't want those other fellows, who came from the city, to have a good time in

their

woods.

Okay, did you write down all of your answers? If you find you have four or more

blanks-not

even an educated guess to plug in there-you have been spending far too much time

seeing

"quality" films like Julia, Manhattan, and Breaking Away. And while you've been

watching

Woody Allen give his imitation of an ingrown hair (a liberal ingrown hair, of

course), you missed

some of the scariest films ever made. For the record, the answers are:

1.Wait Until Dark

2.Halloween

3. Psycho

4.Coma

5. Looking for Mr. Goodbar

6. Alien

7. The Haunting

8. Midnight Express

9. The Bad Seed
10. The Night of the Hunter
11. Night Watch
12. Night of the Living Dead
13. The Birds
14. Dementia-13

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15. What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?
16. I Bury the Living
17. Macabre *
18. X-the Man with the X-Ray Eyes
19. The Omen
20. Deliverance

The first thing we can note about this list of films is that, of the twenty (which I would call the basic coursework in films of gut-level horror in the period we're discussing here), fully fourteen have nothing supernatural going on in them . . . fifteen if you count Alien, which is at least nominally science fiction (I do count it as a supernatural tale, however; I think of it as Lovecraft in outer space, mankind finally going to the Elder Gods rather than they coming to us). So we might be able to say, paradox or not, that movies of fairy-tale horror demand a

heavy dose of

reality to get them rolling. Such reality frees the imagination of excess baggage and makes the

weight of unbelief easier to lift. The audience is propelled into the movie by the feeling that,

under the right set of circumstances, this could happen.

The second thing we could note is that a quarter of them bear a reference either to "night" or

"the dark" in their titles. The dark, it goes almost without saying, provides the basis for our

most primordial fears. As spiritual as we may believe our natures to be, our physiology is

similar to that of all the rest of the mammals that creep, crawl, trot, or walk; we must make do

with the same five senses. There are many mammals whose eyesight is keen, but we are not

among them. There

*This William Castle feature-his first, but unfortunately not his last-was perhaps

the biggest "gotta-see" picture

of my grammar school days. Its title was pronounced by my friends in Stratford, Connecticut as McBare.

"Gotta-see" or not, very few of our parents would let us go because of the grisly ad campaign. I, however,

exercised the inventiveness of the true aficionado and got to see it by telling my mother I was going to Davy

Crockett, a Disney film which I felt I could summarize safely because I had most of

the bubble-gum cards.

are mammals-dogs, for instance-which have even lousier eyesight than we do, but

their

lack of brainpower has forced them to develop other senses to a keenness we cannot

even

imagine (although we may think we can). With dogs, the overdeveloped senses are

those of

hearing and smell.

So-called psychics like to prate of a "sixth sense," a vague term which sometimes

means

telepathy, sometimes precognition, sometimes God knows what, but if we have a sixth

sense,

it is probably just (some just!) the keenness of our reasoning facilities. Fido may

be able to

follow a hundred scents of which we are completely unaware, but the little bugger is

never

going to be any good at checkers, or even Go Fish. This reasoning power has made it

unnecessary for us to breed keener senses into the gene pool; in fact, a large part

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of the

population has sensory equipment which is actually substandard even by human

standardshence

eyeglasses and hearing aids. But we are able to make do because of our

Boeing-747

brains.

All of which is very fine when you're doing a deal in a well-lit executive boardroom
or ironing

the laundry in the living room on a sunny afternoon; but when the lights fail during
a

thunderstorm and we're left to creep around from place to place, trying to remember
where we

left the goddamn candles, the situation changes. Even a 747, sophisticated on-board
radar

and all, can't land in a heavy fog bank. When the lights go out and we find
ourselves stranded

in a shoal of darkness, reality itself has an unpleasant way of fogging in.

When we cut off one avenue of sensory input, that sense simply shuts down (although
it

never shuts down 100 percent, of course; even in a dark room, we will see a trace
pattern in

front of our eyes, and in the most perfect silence we will hear a faint hum . . .

such "phantom

input" only means that the circuits are open and standing by). The same does not
happen with

our brains-fortunately or unfortunately, depending on the situation. It's fortunate
if you happen

to be stuck in a boring situation; you can use your sixth sense to plan the next
day's work, to

wonder what life might be like if you won the grand prize in the state lottery or
the Reader's

Digest Sweepstakes, or to speculate on what that sexy Miss Hepplewaite does-or
doesn'twear

under those tight dresses of hers. On the other hand, the brain's constant
function can be

a mixed blessing. Ask anyone who is a victim of chronic insomnia.

I tell people who say that horror movies don't scare them to make this simple
experiment.

Go see a film like Night of the Living Dead all alone (have you ever noticed how
many people

go to horror movies, not just in pairs or groups, but in actual packs?). Afterwards,
get in your

car, drive to an old, deserted, crumbling house-every town has at least one (except
maybe

Stepford, Connecticut, but they have their own problems there). Let yourself in.

Mount to the

attic. Sit down up there. Listen to the house groan and creak around you. Notice how
much

those creaks sound like someone-or something-mounting the stairs. Smell the must.

The

rot. The decay. Think about the film you have just seen. Consider it as you sit
there in the dark,

unable to see what might be creeping up . . . what might be just about to place its
dirty, twisted

claw on your shoulder . . . or around your neck . . .

This sort of thing can prove, by its very darkness, to be an enlightening

experience.

Fear of the dark is the most childlike fear. Tales of terror are customarily told "around the campfire" or at least after sundown, because what is laughable in the sunshine is often tougher to smile at by starlight. This is a fact that every maker of horror films and writer of horror tales

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recognizes and uses-it is one of those unfailing pressure points where the grip of horror

fiction is surest. * This is particularly true of the filmmakers, of course, and of all the tools that

the filmmaker can bring to bear, it is perhaps this fear of the dark that seems the most natural,

since movies must, by their very nature, be viewed in the dark.

It was Michael Cantalupo, an assistant editor at Everest House (whose imprint you will find

on the spine of this very volume) who reminded me of a gimmick used in the first-run engagements of *Wait Until Dark*, and in this context it bears an affectionate mention. The last

fifteen or twenty minutes of that film are utterly terrifying, partially due to virtuoso performances

turned in by Audrey Hepburn and Alan Arkin (and in my view, Arkin's performance as Harry

Roat, Jr., from *Scarsdale* may be the greatest evocation of screen villainy ever,

rivalling and

perhaps surpassing Peter Lorre's in *M*), partially due to the brilliant gimmick on which Frederick

Knott's story turns.

Hepburn, in a final desperate effort to save her life, breaks every damned lightbulb in the

apartment and hallway, so that she and the sighted Arkin will be on even terms.

Trouble is, she

forgets one light . . . but you and I probably would have forgotten it, too. It's

the bulb inside the

refrigerator.

Anyway, the in-theater gimmick was to turn out every damn light in the auditorium except for

the EXIT lights over the doors. I never real-

*Now and then someone will run brilliantly counter to the tradition and produce a piece of what is sometimes

called "sunlit horror." Ramsey Campbell does this particularly well; see his aptly named collection of short stories

Demons by Daylight, for instance.

ized until the last ten minutes of *Wait Until Dark* how much light there is in most theaters, even

when the movie's playing. There are those tiny "dim-bulbs" set into the ceiling if the theater is

one of the new breed, those gauche but somehow lovely electric flambeaux glowing along the

walls in the older ones. In a pinch, you can always find your way back to your seat after using

the bathroom by the light being thrown from the screen itself. Except that the climactic few

minutes of Wait Until Dark are set entirely in that black apartment. You have only your ears,

and what they hear-Miss Hepburn screaming, Arkin's tortured breathing (he's been stabbed a

bit earlier on, and we're allowed to relax a little, to think he might even be dead, when he pops

out again like a malefic jack-in-the-box)-isn't very comforting. So there you sit.

Your big old

Boeing-747 brain is cranked up like a kid's jalopy with the pedal to the metal, and it has very

little concrete input to work on. So you sit. there, sweating it out, hoping the lights will

eventually come on again . . . and sooner or later, they do. Mike Cantalupo told me he saw

Wait Until Dark in a theater so sleazy that even the EXIT lights were broken.

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Man, that must have been bad.

Mike's recollection of that took me fondly back to another film-William Castle's The Tingler,

which had a similar (if, in the Castle style, infinitely more crass) gimmick.

Castle, whom I've

already mentioned in connection with Macabre-known to all us WASPy little kids as

McBare,

you'll remember-was the king of the gimmicks; he originated the \$100,000 "fright insurance"

policy, for instance; if you dropped dead during the film, your heirs got the money.

Then there

was the great "Nurse on Duty at All Performances" gimmick; there was the "You Must

Have

Your Blood Pressure Taken in the Lobby Before Viewing This Horrifying Film" gimmick

(that

one was used as part of The House on Haunted Hill promo), and all sorts of other gimmicks.

The exact plot specifics of The Tingler, a film so exquisitely low budget that it

probably made

back its production costs after a thousand people had seen it, now escape me, but

there was

this monster (the Tingler, natch) that lived on fear. When its victims were so

scared they

couldn't even scream, it attached itself to their spines and sorta . . . well . . .

tingled them to

death. I know that must sound pretty fucking stupid, but in the film, it worked

(although it

probably helped to be eleven years old when you saw it). As I remember, one sexy

miss got it

in the bathtub. Bad news.

But never mind the plot; let's get on to the gimmick. At one point the Tinger got into a movie

theater, killed the projectionist, and somehow shorted out the electricity. At that moment in the

theater where you were watching the movie, all the lights went out and the screen went dark.

Now as it happened, the only thing that could get the Tinger to let go of your spine once it had

attached itself was a good loud scream, which changed the quality of the adrenaline it fed on.

And at this point, a narrator on the soundtrack cried out, "The Tinger is now in this theater! It

may be under your seat! So scream! Scream! Scream for your lives!!" The audience was of

course happy to oblige, and in the next scene we see the Tinger fleeing for its life, vanquished

for the time being by all those screaming people. *

Besides the movies which raise the scary concept of the dark in their titles, almost every

other film listed in the little quiz I gave you uses that fear of the dark heavily.

All but

approximately eighteen minutes of John Carpenter's Halloween are set after nightfall. The

major scare scenes in Psycho all take place after dark. In Looking for Mr. Goodbar, the final

horrible sequence (my wife ran for the women's room, believing she was going to toss

her

cookies), where Tom Berenger stabs Diane Keaton to death, is shot in her dark apartment,

with only a flickering strobe-light for illumination. In Alien, that constant motif of the dark barely

needs mentioning. "In space, no one can hear you scream," the ad copy read; it also could

have said, "In space, it is always one minute after midnight." Dawn never comes in

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that

Lovecraftian gulf between the stars.

Hill House is always spooky, but it saves its really big effects-the face in the

wall, the

bulging doors, the booming noises, the thing that held Eleanor's hand (she thought

it was

Theo, but-gulp!-it wasn't)-for well past sunset. It was another Everest House

editor, Bill

Thompson (who has been my editor for about a thousand years; perhaps in a previous life I

was his editor and now he's having his revenge), who reminded me of The Night of the Hunter-and mea culpa that I should have needed reminding-and told me that one of the scenes of horror

*God, it's fun to think about some of the desperate gimmicks that have been used to sell bad horror movieslike

those Dish Nights and Bank Nights used to lure people into the movie houses during the thirties, they linger pleasantly in the memory. During one imported Italian turkey, *The Night Evelyn Came Out of the Grave* (nifty title!), the theaters advertised "bloodcorn," which was ordinary popcorn with a red food dye added. During *Jack the Ripper*, a 1960 example of "Hammer horror" written by Jimmy Sangster, the black and white film turned to gruesome color during the last five minutes, when the Ripper, who has unwisely chosen to hide in an elevator shaft, is squished under a descending car. which has remained with him over the years was the sight of Shelley Winters's hair floating in the water after the homicidal preacher has disposed of her in the river. It happens, naturally, after dark.

There is an interesting similarity between the scene in which the little girl kills her mother with a garden trowel in *Night of the Living Dead* and the climactic scene in *The Birds*, where Tippi Hedren is trapped in the attic and attacked by crows, sparrows, and gulls. Both of these scenes are classic examples of how dark and light can be used selectively. We will remember, most of us, from our own childhoods that a lot of light had the power to vanquish imagined

evils and fears, but sometimes a little light only made them worse. It was the streetlight outside that made the branches of a nearby tree look like witch fingers, or it was the moonlight streaming in the window that made the jumble of toys pushed away in the closet take on the aspect of a crouching. Thing ready to shamle in and attack at any moment. During the matricide scene in Night of the Living Dead (which, like the shower scene in Psycho, seems almost endless to our shocked eyes the first time we see it), the little girl's arm strikes a hanging lightbulb, and the cellar becomes a nightmare dreamscape of shifting, swinging shadows-revealing, concealing, revealing again. During the attack of the birds in the attic, it is the big flashlight Ms. Hedren carries which provides this strobe effect (also mentioned in connection with Looking for Mr. Goodbar and used again-more irritatingly and pointlessly-during Marlon Brando's incoherent monologue near the end of Apocalypse Now)

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and also provides the scene with a pulse, a beat-at first the flashlight beam moves rapidly as

Ms. Hedren uses the light to ward off the birds . . . but as she is gradually sapped
of strength
and lapses first into shock and then into unconsciousness, the light moves more and
more
slowly, sinking to the floor. Until there is only dark . . . and in that dark, the
tenebrous, whirring
flutter of many wings.

I'll not belabor the point by analyzing the "darkness quotient" in all these films,
but will close
this aspect of the discussion by pointing out that even in those few movies that
achieve that
feeling of "sunlit horror," there are often feary moments in the dark-Genevieve
Bujold's climb
up the service ladder and over the operating room in Coma takes place in the dark,
as does
Ed's (Jon Voight) climb up the bluff near the end of Deliverance . . . not to
mention digging up
the grave containing the jackal bones in The Omen, and Luana Anders's creepy
discovery of
the underwater "memorial" to the long-dead little sister in Francis Coppola's first
feature film
(made for AIP), Dementia-13.

Still, before leaving the subject entirely, here's a further sampling: Night Must
Fall, Night of
the Lepus, Dracula, Prince of Darkness, The Black Pit of Dr. M., The Black Sleep,
Black

Sunday, The Black Room, Black Sabbath, Dark Eyes of London, The Dark, Dead of Night, Night of Terror, Night of the Demon, Nightwing, Night of the Eagle . . .

Well, you get it. If there had been no such thing as darkness, the makers of horror movies would have needed to invent it.

10

I have held out mention of one of the films from the quiz, partially because it's the antithesis of many of those we've already discussed-it depends for its horror not upon darkness but upon light-and also because it leads naturally into a brief discussion of something else that the mythic, or "fairy-tale" horror movie will do to us if it can. We all understand about the "gross-out," which is fairly easy to achieve,* but it is only in the horror movies that the gross-out-that most childish of emotional impulses-sometimes achieves the level of art. Now, I can hear some of you say that there is nothing artistic about grossing somebody out-all you really have to do is chew your food and then hang your open mouth in your table-mate's facebut what about the works of Goya? Or Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes and soup cans, for that matter?

Even the very worst horror movies sometimes achieve a moment or two of success on this

level. Dennis Etchison, a fine writer in the genre, reminisced fondly with me on the phone one

day not too long ago about a brief sequence in *The Giant Spider Invasion* where a lady drinks

her morning hi-potency vitamin cocktail, all unknowing that a rather plump spider fell into the

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blender just before she turned it on. Yum yum. In the eminently forgettable film

Squirm, there is

that one unforgettable moment (for all two hundred of us who saw the picture) when the lady

taking a shower looks up to see why the water stopped coming and sees a showerhead

clogged with dangling nightcrawlers. In Dario Argento's *Suspiria*, a bunch of schoolgirls are

subjected to a rain of maggots . . . while sitting at the dinner table, no less. All

of it has nothing

to do with the film's plot, but it is vaguely interesting, in a repulsive sort of

way. In *Maniac*,

directed by former soft-core filmmaker William Lustig, there is the incredible moment when the

homicidal ding-dung (Joe Spinell) carefully scalps one of his victims;

*I can remember, as a kid, one of my fellow kids asking me to imagine sliding down a long, polished bannister

which suddenly and without warning turns into a razorblade. Man, I was days getting over that.

the camera does not even leer at this-it merely stares at it with a kind of dead, contemplative

eye that makes the scene well-nigh impossible to watch.

As noted previously, good horror movies often operate most powerfully on this

"wanna-look-at-my-chewed-up-food?" level-a primitive, childish level. I would call it the

"YUCH factor" . . . sometimes also known as the "Oh my God, was that gross!" factor.

This is

the point at which most good liberal film critics and most good reactionary film critics part

company on the subject of the horror film (see, for instance, the difference between

Lynn

Minton's review of Dawn of the Dead in McCall's-she left after two reels or so-and

the cover

story in the Arts section of The Boston Phoenix on the same film). Like punk rock music, the

horror movie capable of delivering the good gross-out wallop finds its art in childish acts of

anarchy-the moment in The Omen where the photographer is decapitated by a falling pane of

glass is art of the most peculiar sort, and one cannot blame critics who find it easier to respond

to Jane Fonda as a wholly unbelievable screen incarnation of Lillian Hellman in

Julia than to

stuff like this.

But the gross-out is art, and it is important that we have an understanding of this.

Blood can

fly everywhere and the audience will remain largely unimpressed. If, on the other hand, the

audience has come to like and understand-or even just to appreciate-the characters they

are watching as real people, if some artistic link has been formed there, blood can fly

everywhere and the audience cannot remain unimpressed. I can't remember, for instance,

anyone who walked out of Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde or Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch

who didn't look as if he or she had been hit on the head with a very large board.

Yet people

walk out of other Peckinpah films-Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, Cross of Ironyawning.

That vital linkage just never happens.

That's all fine, and there is little argument about the virtues of Bonnie and Clyde as art, but

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let us return momentarily to the pureed arachnid in The Giant Spider Invasion. This doesn't

qualify as art in respect to that idea of linkage between audience and character at

all. Believe

me, we don't care very much about the lady who drinks the spider (or anyone else in this

movie, for that matter), but all the same there is that moment of frisson, that one moment when

the groping fingers of the filmmaker find a chink in our defenses, shoot through it, and squeeze

down on one of those psychic pressure points. We identify with the woman who is unknowingly

drinking the spider on a level that has nothing to do with her character; we identify with her

solely as a human being in a situation which has suddenly turned rotten-in other words, the

gross-out serves as the means of a last-ditch sort of identification when the more conventional

and noble means of characterization have failed. When she drinks the drink, we shudderand

reaffirm our own humanity. *

Having said all that, let's turn to X-The Man with the X-Ray Eyes, one of the most interesting and offbeat little horror movies ever made, and one that ends with one of the most

shuddery gross-out scenes ever filmed.

This 1963 movie was produced and directed by Roger Corman, who at that time was in the

process of metamorphosing from the dull caterpillar who had produced such meatloaf

movies

as Attack of the Crab Monsters and The Little Shop of Horror (not even notable for what may

have been Jack Nicholson's screen debut) and into the butterfly who was responsible for such

interesting and rather beautiful horror films as The Masque of the Red Death and The Terror.

The Man with the X-Ray Eyes marks the point where this strange two-step creature came out

of its cocoon, I think. The screenplay was written by Ray Russell, the author of Sardonicus and

a number of other novels among them the rather overripe Incubus and the much more successful Princess Pamela.

In The Man with the X-Ray Eyes, Ray Milland plays a scientist who develops eyedrops which enable him to see through walls, clothing, playing-cards, you name it; a kind of

super-Murine, if you will. But once the process begins, there is no slowing it down.

Milland's

eyes begin to undergo a physical change, first becoming thickly bloodshot and then taking on a

queer yellow cast. It is at this point that we begin to feel rather nervous-perhaps we sense the

gross-out coming, and in a very real sense it's already arrived. Our eyes are one of those

vulnerable chinks in the armor, one of those places where we can be had. Imagine, for

instance, jamming your thumb into someone's wide-open eye, feeling the squish,
seeing it

sorta squirt out at you. Nasty, right? Immoral to even consider such a thing. But
surely you
remember that

*This might lead to the accusation that my definition of the horror movie as art is
much too wide-that I just let
in everything. That is not true at all-movies like Massacre at Central High and

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Bloody Mutilators work on no

level. And if my ideas concerning the boundaries of art seem rather lenient, that's
too bad. I'm no snob. and if you

are, that's your problem. In my business, if you lose your taste for good baloney,
it's time you got into some other

line of work.

time-honored Halloween party game Dead Man, where peeled grapes are passed from hand
to hand to hand in the dark, to the solemn intonation of "These are the dead man's
eyes"? Ulp,

right? Yuck, right? Or as my kids say, Guh-ROSS!

Like our other facial equipment, eyes are something we all have in common-even that
old

poop the Ayatullah Khomeini has a pair. But to the best of my knowledge, no horror
movie has

ever been made about a nose out of control, and while there has never been a film

called The

Crawling Ear, there was one called The Crawling Eye. We all understand that eyes are the

most vulnerable of our sensory organs, the most vulnerable of our facial accessories, and they

are (ick!) soft. Maybe that's the worst . . .

So when Milland dons shades for the second half of the movie, we become increasingly nervous about what might be going on behind those shades. In addition, something else is

happening-something that elevates The Man with the X-Ray Eyes to a rather higher plateau

of art. It becomes a kind of Lovecraftian horror movie, but in a sense that is different-and

somehow purer-than the sort of Lovecraftiness used in Alien.

The Elder Gods, Lovecraft told us, are out there, and their one desire is to somehow get

back in-and there are lines of power accessible to them, Lovecraft intimates, which are so

powerful that one look at the sources of these lines of power would drive mortal men to

madness; forces so powerful that a whole galaxy aflame could not equal its thousandth part.

It is one of these power sources, I think, that Ray Milland begins to glimpse as his sight

continues to improve at a steady, inexorable pace. He sees it first as a prismatic, shifting light

somewhere out in the darkness-the trippy sort of thing you might see at the top of
an LSD
high. Corman, you'll remember, also gave us Peter Fonda in The Trip (co-written by
Jack
Nicholson), not to mention The Wild Angels, which contains that wonderful moment
when a
dying Bruce Dern croaks out, "Somebody gimme a straight cigarette." Anyway, this
bright core
of light Milland sometimes sees gradually grows larger and clearer. Worse still, it
may be alive .
. . and aware it's being watched. Milland has seen through everything to the very
edges of the
universe and beyond, and what he has found there is driving him crazy.
This force eventually becomes so clear to him that it fills the whole screen during
the
point-of-view shots: a bright, shifting, monstrous thing that won't quite come into
focus. At last
Milland can stand it no longer. He drives his car to a deserted spot (that bright
Presence
hanging before his eyes all the time) and whips off his shades to reveal eyes which
have gone
an utter, glistening black. He pauses for a moment . . . and then rips his own eyes
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out. Corman

freezes the frame on those staring, bloody sockets. But I have heard rumors-they may
or
may not be true-that the final line of dialogue was cut from the film as too
horrifying. If true, it
was the only possible capper for what has already happened. According to the rumor,
Milland
screams: I can still see!

11

This is only to dip our fingers in that deep, deep pool of common human experience
and
fears which form the myth-pool. It would be possible to go on with dozens of other
specifics;
with phobias such as the fear of heights (Vertigo), fear of snakes (Sssssss) , of
cats (Eye of
the Cat), of rats (Willard, Ben) -and all those movies which depend on the gross-out
for their
ultimate effect. Beyond these there are even wider vistas of myth . . . but we have
to save
something for later, right?
And no matter how many specifics we cover, we'll always find ourselves returning to
that
idea of phobic pressure points . . . just as the most lovely waltz relies, at
bottom, on the
simplicity of the box-step. The horror movie is a closed box with a crank on the
side, and in the
last analysis it all comes back to turning that crank until Jack jumps out into our

faces, holding

his ax and grinning his murderous grin. Like sex, the experience is infinitely

desirable, but a

discussion of specific effect takes on a certain sameness.

Rather than going on and on over what is essentially the same plot of ground, let's

close our

brief discussion of the horror movie as myth and fairy tale with what is, after all,

the Big

Cassino: death itself. Here is the trump card which all horror movies hold. But they

do not hold

this card as a veteran bridge-player would hold it, understanding all its

implications and

possibilities for gain; they hold it, rather, as a child would hold the card which

will make the

winning pair in a game of Old Maid. In that fact lies both the limiting factor of

the horror movie

as art and its endless, morbidly captivating charm.

"Death," the boy Mark Petrie thinks at one point in 'Salem's Lot, "is when the

monsters get

you." And if I had to restrict everything I have ever said or written about the

horror genre to one

statement (and many critics will say I should have done, ha-ha), it would be that

one. It is not

the way adults look at death; it is a crude metaphor which leaves little room for

the possibility

of heaven, hell, Nirvana, or that old wheeze about how the great wheel of Karma turns and

we'll get 'em next life, gang. It is a view which-like most horror movies-addresses itself not

to any philosophical speculation about "the afterlife" but which speaks only of the moment

when we finally have to shine off this mortal coil. That instant of death is the only truly universal

rite of passage, and the only one for which we have no psychological or sociological

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input to

explain what changes we may expect as a result of having passed through. All we know is that

we go; and while we have some rules of-etiquette, would it be called?-which bear on the

subject, that actual moment has a way of catching folks unprepared. People pass away while

making love, while standing in elevators, while putting dimes in parking meters.

Some go in

midsneeze. Some die in restaurants, some in cheap one-night hotels, and a few while sitting

on the john. We cannot count on dying in bed or with our boots on. So it would be remarkable

indeed if we did not fear death a little. It's just sort of there, isn't it, the great irreducible x-factor

of our lives, faceless father of a hundred religions, so seamless and ungraspable
that it usually
isn't even discussed at cocktail parties. Death becomes myth in the horror movies,
but let's be
clear on the fact that horror movies mythicize death on the simplest level: death in
the horror
movies is when the monsters get you.

We fans of the horror movies have seen people clubbed, burned at the stake (Vincent
Price,
as the Witchfinder General in AIP's *The Conqueror Worm*, surely one of the most
revolting
horror pictures to be released by a major studio in the sixties, had a regular
cookout at the
climax of this one), shot, crucified, stabbed through the eyes with needles, eaten
alive by
grasshoppers, by ants, by dinosaurs, and even by cockroaches; we have seen people
beheaded (*The Omen*, *Friday the 13th*, *Maniac*), sucked dry of their blood, gobbled up
by
sharks (who could forget the little kid's torn and bloodstained rubber float nudging
gently
against the shoreline in *Jaws*?) and pirahna fish; we have seen bad guys go down
screaming
in pools of quicksand and pools of acid; we have seen our fellow humans squashed,
stretched,
and bloated to death; at the end of Brian De Palma's *The Fury*, John Cassavetes

literally

explodes.

Again, liberal critics, whose concepts of civilization, life, and death are usually

more

complex, are apt to frown on this sort of gratuitous slaughter, to see it (at best)

as the moral

equivalent of pulling wings off flies, and, at worst, as that symbolic lynch mob in

action. But

there is something in that wing-pulling simile that bears examination. There are few

children

who have not pulled the wings off a few flies at some point in their development, or

squatted

patiently on the sidewalk to see how a bug dies. In the opening scene of *The Wild*

Bunch a

group of happy, giggling children burn a scorpion to death-a scene indicative of

what people

who care little (or know little) about children often erroneously call "the cruelty

of childhood."

Children are rarely cruel on purpose, and they even more rarely torture, as they

understand

the concept; * they may, however, kill in the spirit of experimentation, watching

the death

struggles of the bug on the sidewalk in the same clinical way that a biologist would

watch a

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guinea pig die after inhaling a whiff of nerve gas. Tom Sawyer, we'll remember, just about

broke his neck in his hurry to get a look at Huck's dead cat, and one of the payments he accepts

for the "privilege" of whitewashing his fence is a dead rat "and a string to swing it on."

Or consider this:

*Now, don't get me wrong or misinterpret what I'm saying. Kids can be mean and unlovely, and when you see

them at their worst, they can make you think black thoughts about the future of the human race. But meanness

and cruelty, although related, are not the same thing at all. A cruel action is a studied action; it requires a bit of

thought. Meanness, on the other hand, is unpremeditated and unthinking. The results may be similar for the

person- usually another child-who gets the butt end, but it seems to me that in a moral society, intent or lack of

it is pretty important.

Bing Crosby is said to have told a story about one of his sons at the age of six or so who

was inconsolable when his pet turtle died. To distract the boy, Bing suggested that they

have a funeral, and his son, seeming only slightly consoled, agreed. The two took a cigar

box, lined it carefully with silk, painted the outside black, and then dug a hole in

the back
yard. Bing carefully lowered the "coffin" into the grave, said a long, heartfelt
prayer, and
sang a hymn. At the end of the service, the boy's eyes were shining with sorrow and
excitement. Then Bing asked if he would like to have one last look as his pet before
they
covered the coffin with earth. The boy said he would, and Bing raised the cigar-box
lid. The
two gazed down reverently, and suddenly the turtle moved. The boy stared at it for a
long
time, then looked up at his father and said, "Let's kill it." *

Kids are endlessly, voraciously curious, not only about death but about
everything-and why
not? They are like people who just came in and sat down during a good movie that's
been on
for thousands of years. They want to know what the story is, who the characters are,
and most
of all, what the interior logic of the play may be-is it a drama? a tragedy? a
comedy? perhaps
an out-and-out farce? They don't know because they have not (as yet) had Socrates,
Plato,
Kant, or Erich Segal to instruct them. When you're five, your big gurus are Santa
Claus and
Ronald McDonald; life's burning questions include whether or not you can eat
crackers upside
down and if that stuff in the middle of the golfball really is a deadly poison. When

you're five,

you seek knowledge down those avenues that are open to you.

Pursuant to this, I'll tell you my own dead cat story. When I was nine and living in Stratford,

Connecticut, two friends of mine-brothers-from down the street discovered the stiffening

body of a dead cat in the gutter near Burrets' Building Materials, which was across the street

from the vacant lot where we played baseball. I was called into consultation to add

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my

thoughts to the problem of the dead cat. The very interesting problem of the dead cat.

It was a gray cat, quite obviously mashed by a passing car. Its eyes were half-open, and we

all noticed that there seemed to be dust and road grit gathering on them. First

deduction: You

don't care if dust gets in your eyes when you're dead (all our deductions assumed that if it was

true for cats, then it must be true for kids) .

We examined it for maggots

No maggots

"Maybe there's maggots inside it," Charlie said hopefully (Charlie

*From Kids: Day in and Day Out, edited by Elisabeth Scharlatt (New York: Simon and

Schuster, 1979) ; this

particular story related by Walter Jerrold.

was one of the fellows who referred to the William Castle film as McBare, and on

rainy days he

was apt to call me up and ask me if I wanted to come down the street to his house

and read

"comet bwoots").

We examined the dead cat for maggots, turning it from one side to the other-using a

stick,

of course; no telling what germs you might get from a dead cat. There were no

maggots that

we could see.

"Maybe there's maggots in its brain," Charlie's brother Nicky said, his eyes

glowing. "Maybe

there's maggots inside it, eating up its braiiiiiin."

"That's impossible," I said. "Your brains are, like, airtight. Nothin' can get

inside there."

They absorbed this.

We stood around the dead cat in a circle.

Then Nicky said suddenly: "If we drop a brick on its heinie, will it shit?"

This question of postmortem biology was absorbed and discussed. It was finally

agreed that

the test should be made. A brick was found. There was a discussion of who should get

to

bombs-away the brick on the dead cat. The problem was solved in time-honored

fashion: we

put our feet in. The rites of eenie-meenie-miney-moe were invoked. Foot after foot
left the

circle until only Nicky's was left.

The brick was dropped.

The dead cat did not shit.

Deduction number two: After you're dead, you won't shit if someone drops a brick on
your
ass.

Soon after, a baseball game started up, and the dead cat was left.

As the days passed, an ongoing investigation of the cat continued, and it is always
the dead

cat in the gutter out in front of Burrets' Building Materials that I think of when I
read Richard

Wilbur's fine poem "The Groundhog." The maggots put in their appearance a couple of
days

later, and we watched their fever-boil with horrified, revolted interest. "They're
eatin' his eyes,"

Tommy Erbter from up the street pointed out hoarsely. "Look at that, you guys,
they're even
eatin' his eyes."

Eventually the maggots moved out, leaving the dead cat looking considerably thinner,

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its fur

now faded to a dull, uninteresting color, sparse and knotted. We came less

frequently. The

cat's decay had entered a less gaudy stage. Still, it was my habit to check the cat
on my mile's

walk to school each morning; it was just another stop on the way, part of the
morning's ritually

running a stick over the picket fence in front of the empty house or skipping a
couple of

stones across the pond in the park.

In late September the tag-end of a hurricane hit Stratford. There was a minor flood,
and

when the waters went down a couple of days later, the dead cat was gone-it had been
washed away. I remember it well now, and I suppose I will all my life, as my first
intimate

experience with death. That cat may be gone from the charts, but not from my heart.

Sophisticated movies demand sophisticated reactions from their audiences-that is,
they

demand that we react to them as adults. Horror movies are not sophisticated, and
because

they are not, they allow us to regain our childish perspective on death-perhaps not
such a

bad thing. I'll not descend to the romantic oversimplification that suggests we see
things more

clearly as children, but I will suggest that children see more intensely. The greens
of lawns are,

to the child's eye, the color of lost emeralds in H. Rider Haggard's conception of
King

Solomon's Mines, the blue of the winter sky is as sharp as an icepick, the white of new snow is

a dream-blast of energy. And black . . . is blacker. Much blacker indeed.

Here is the final truth of horror movies: They do not love death, as some have suggested;

they love life. They do not celebrate deformity but by dwelling on deformity, they sing of health

and energy. By showing us the miseries of the damned, they help us to rediscover the smaller

(but never petty) joys of our own lives. They are the barber's leeches of the psyche, drawing

not bad blood but anxiety . . . for a little while, anyway.

The horror movie asks you if you want to take a good close look at the dead cat (or the

shape under the sheet, to use a metaphor from the introduction to my short story collection) . .

. but not as an adult would look at it. Never mind the philosophical implications of death or the

religious possibilities inherent in the idea of survival; the horror film suggests we just have a

good close look at the physical artifact of death. Let us be children masquerading as

pathologists. We will, perhaps, link hands like children in a circle, and sing the song we all

know in our hearts: time is short, no one is really okay, life is quick and dead is

dead.

Omega, the horror film sings in those children's voices. Here is the end. Yet the

ultimate

subtext that underlies all good horror films is, But not yet. Not this time. Because

in the final

sense, the horror movie is the celebration of those who feel they can examine death

because it

does not yet live in their own hearts.

CHAPTER VII

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The Horror Movie as Junk Food

BY NOW, serious horror fans may be wondering uneasily if I have lost my wits-always

assuming I had any to begin with. I've found a few (very few, it's true, but still a

few) good

things to say about The Amityville Horror, and have even mentioned Prophecy,

generally

agreed to be a terrible horror movie, in a light not exactly unfavorable. If you are

one of these

uneasy ones, I must add to your feelings by telling you that I intend to say a great

many good

things about the Englishman James Herbert, author of The Rat, The Fog, and The

Survivor in

a later chapter-but that is a different case, because Herbert is not a bad novelist;

he is simply

regarded as one by fantasy fans who've not read his work.

I am no apologist for bad filmmaking, but once you've spent twenty years or so going to

horror movies, searching for diamonds (or diamondchips) in the dreck of the B-pics, you

realize that if you don't keep your sense of humor, you're done for. You also begin to seek the

patterns and appreciate them when you find them.

There's something else that needs saying here, too, and I might as well give it to you

straight from the shoulder: once you've seen enough horror films, you begin to get a taste for

really shitty movies. Films that are just bad (like The Comeback, Jack Jones's ill-advised foray

into the field of the horror film) can be dismissed impatiently, with never a backward glance.

But real fans of the genre look back on a film like The Brain from Planet Arous (It Came From

Another World WITH AN INSATIABLE LUST FOR EARTH WOMEN) with something like real love. It is the love one spares for an idiot child, true, but love is love, right? Right.

In this spirit, let me quote-in its marvelous entirety-a review from The Castle of Frankenstein's TV Movieguide. The Movieguide was published in the magazine at irregular

intervals right up until the day when Calvin Beck's remarkable journal ceased publication. This

review is, in fact, from the Movieguide which appeared in the last issue of Coff, #

24. Here is

what an uncredited reviewer (Beck himself, perhaps) had to say about the 1953 movie

Robot

Monster:

It is a handful of flicks like this that makes all these listing chores [i.e., The

Movieguide

feature] something to look forward to. Certainly among the finest terrible movies

ever made,

this ridiculous gem presents as economical a space invasion as ever committed to

film: one

(r) Ro-Man invader consisting of (a) a gorilla suit, (b) a diving helmet with a set

of antennae.

Hiding out in one of the more familiar Hollywood caves with his extraterrestrial

bubble

machine (no, we're not being facetious: it actually is a 2-way "alien" radio-TV

thing,

consisting of an old war-surplus shortwave set resting on a small kitchen table,

that emits

Lawrence Welk-like bubbles), Ro-Man's trying to wipe out the last six humans left on

earth

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and thus make the planet safe for colonization by Ro-Men (from the planet Ro-Man,

where

else?). This early 3-D effort has attained legendary (and richly deserved) status as

one of

the most laughable of all poverty row quickies, although the pic does make some scatterbrained sense when viewed as a child's eye monster fantasy (it's all a dream experienced by a sci-fi-crazed '50s tyke). Rousing musical score by Elmer Bernstein is

great and keeps it all moving. Directed in three frenzied days by Phil Tucker, who also did

the little-known and equally hysterical Lenny Bruce vehicle, DANCE HALL RACKET.

Stars George Nader, Claudia Barrett, John Mylong, Selena Royle.

Ah, Selena, where are you now?

I have seen the film discussed in this review, and will personally testify that every word is

true. A bit further on in this chapter we will listen to what Coff had to say about two other

legendary bad movies, The Blob and Invasion of the Saucer Men, but I don't believe my heart

can stand it right now. Let me just add that I made a grave mistake concerning Robot Monster

(and Ro-Man can be seen, in a mad sort of way, as the forerunner of the evil Cylons in

Battlestar Galactica) about ten years ago. It came on the Saturday night Creature Feature, and

I prepared for the occasion by smoking some pretty good reefer. I don't smoke dope often,

because when stoned everything strikes me funny. That night I almost laughed myself

into a

hernia. Tears were rolling down my cheeks and I was literally on the floor for most of the

movie. Luckily, the movie only runs sixty-three minutes; another twenty minutes of watching

Ro-Man tune his war-surplus shortwave/ bubble machine

in "one of the more familiar Hollywood caves" and I think I would have laughed myself to death.

Since any affectionate discussion of really horrible movies (as opposed to horror movies) is

in the nature of a breast baring, I must admit here that I not only liked John

Frankenheimer's

Prophecy, I actually saw it three times. The only bad movie to equal this score in my personal

pantheon is the William Friedkin movie Sorcerer. I liked that one because there were a lot of

close-ups in it of sweaty people working hard and laboring machines; truck engines and huge

wheels spinning in soupy mud and frayed fanbelts in Panavision-70. Great stuff. I thought

Sorcerer was marvelous fun. *

But never mind Friedkin; onward into the Maine woods with John Frankenheimer. Except that the film was really shot on location in Washington State . . . and looks it.

This film

concerns a public health

*I wasn't able to have any fun with Friedkin's more recent film, Cruising, although it fascinated me because I suspect it indicates the wave of the future for the bad film which has a big budget; it has a sparkly look that is still somehow cheesy-it's like a dead rat in a Lucite block.

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a baby, but

Foxworth refuses to bring a kid into a world where rats sometimes eat babies and the technological society keeps dumping radioactive waste into the oceans. He jumps at the trip to

Maine to get away from patching up ratbites for awhile. His wife jumps at it because she's

pregnant and wants to break it to him gently. As dedicated to the idea of zero population

growth as he may be, Foxworth has apparently left all the responsibility for actually preventing

the baby to his wife, who, played by Ms. Shire, succeeds in looking extremely tired throughout

the film. We can readily believe she may be whoopsing her cookies every morning.

But once in Maine, this slightly odd couple finds a lot of other stuff going on as well. The

Indians and the paper company are at swords' points over the alleged pollution issue; early on,

one of the company men nearly opens up the leader of the Indian protestors with a Steihl

chainsaw. Nasty. Nastier still are the evidences of pollution. Foxworth notices that the old

Indian wallah (one dares not call him Chief) is regularly burning his hands with his cigarettes

because he feels no pain-a classic sign of mercury poisoning, Foxworth tells Shire gravely. A

tadpole the size of a salmon jumps up on the bank of the lake, and while fishing

Foxworth sees

a salmon roughly the size of Flipper.

Unfortunately for his pregnant wife, Foxworth catches some fish and they eat them.

Very

bad for the baby, as it turns out . . . although the question of exactly what Ms.

Shire may

deliver a few months down the road is left to our imaginations. By the time we

finish the movie,

the question seems less than burning.

Mutated babies are discovered in a net placed in a stream-horrible, rugose things

with

black eyes and malformed bodies, things that mewl and cry in almost human voices.

These

"children" are the movie's one startling effect.

Mother is out there someplace . . . and she makes her appearance soon enough,

looking

sort of like a skinned pig and sort of like a bear turned inside-out. It pursues

Foxworth, Shire,

and the motley band they are a part of. A helicopter pilot has his head crunched off

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(but it is a

discreet crunch; this is a PG movie) and the Bad Old Executive Who Has Told Lies at

Every

Turn is similarly gobbled up. At one point the monster-mother wades across a lake

that looks

like it might be a child's wading pool shot from table-top level (bringing back fond memories of

such Japanese triumphs of special-effects technology as Ghidrah, the Three-Headed Monster

and Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster) and crashes its way into a cabin where the dwindling band

of refugees has taken refuge. Although he is presented to us as a city boy from the word go,

Foxworth manages to dispatch the monster with a bow and arrow. And as Foxworth and Shire

fly out of the wilderness, another monster rears its shaggy head to stare after their departing light plane.

George Romero's film Dawn of the Dead came out at about the same time as Prophecy (June-July 1979) and I found it remarkable (and amusing) that Romero had made a horror film

for about two million dollars that managed to look like six million, while

Frankenheimer made a

twelve-million-dollar movie that managed to look like about two.

Lots of stuff is wrong with the Frankenheimer film. None of the major Indian parts are played

by real Indians; the old Indian wallah has a teepee in a northern New England area which was

populated by lodgebuilding Indians; the science, while not completely wrong, is used in an

opportunistic way that is not really fair considering the fact that the movie's makers purported to have made a movie of "social conscience"; the characters are stock; the special effects (with the exception of those weird baby mutants) are bad.

All of that I will cheerfully agree to. But I come stubbornly, helplessly back to the fact that I liked *Prophecy*, and just writing about it has made me long to rush out and see it a fourth (and maybe a fifth) time. I mentioned that you begin to see and appreciate patterns in horror movies, and to love them. These patterns are sometimes as stylized as the movements in a Japanese noh play or the passages in a John Ford western. And *Prophecy* is a throwback to the fifties horror films as surely as the Sex Pistols and the Ramones are throwbacks to the "dirty white boys" of the rockabilly explosion in 1956-1959.

For me, settling into *Prophecy* is as comfortable as settling into an old easy-chair and visiting with good friends. All the components are there; Robert Foxworth could as easily be Hugh Marlowe from *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* or Richard Carlson in *It Came from Outer Space*

or Richard Denning in The Black Scorpion. Talia Shire could as easily be Barbara

Rush or

Mara Corday or one of half a dozen other monstermovie heroines from that same Big

Bug era

(although I would be lying if I didn't admit to some disappointment in Ms. Shire,

who was

brilliant as Rocky Balboa's shy and hesitant amour Adrian; she's not as pretty as I

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remember

Mara Corday being, and she never appears in a white one-piece swimsuit, when

everyone

knows that this particular type of horror movie demands that at one point the

heroine must

appear-and be menaced-while wearing a white one-piece swimsuit).

The monster is pretty hokey-looking, too. But I loved that old monster, spiritual

sister to

Godzilla, Mighty Joe Young, Gorgo, and all the dinosaurs that were ever embedded in

ice-floes

and managed to get out so they could go thundering slowly down Fifth Avenue,

squashing

electronics shops and eating policemen; the monster in Prophecy gave me back a

splendid

part of my misspent youth, a part which included such irascible friends as the

Venusian Ymir

and the Deadly Mantis (who knocks over a city bus on which, for one splendid moment,

the

word TONKA can be clearly read). She's a pretty fine monster all the same.

The mercury pollution causing all those monsters is pretty good, too-an updating of

the old

radiation-caused-these-Big-Bugs plot device. Then there's the fact that the monster

gets all the

bad guys. At one point she kills a little kid, but the kid, who is on a hiking trip

with his parents,

really deserves to go. He has brought along his suitcase radio and is Defiling the

Wilderness

with Rock 'N Roll. All that is missing from Prophecy (and its omission may have only

been an

oversight) is a sequence where the monster stomps the rotten old paper mill flat.

The Giant Spider Invasion also comes equipped with a plot straight out of the

fifties, and

there were even a lot of fifties actors and actresses on view in it, including

Barbara Hale and

Bill Williams . . . halfway through it, I had the feeling that what I had really

stumbled on was a

crazed episode of the old Perry Mason series.

In spite of the title, there is really only one giant spider, but we don't feel

cheated because

it's a dilly. It appears to be a Volkswagen covered with half a dozen bearskin rugs.

Four spider

legs, operated by people crammed inside this VW spider, one assumes, have been

attached to

each side. The taillights double neatly as blinking red spider eyes. It is

impossible to see such

a budget-conscious special effect without feeling a wave of admiration.

Other bad movies abound; each fan has his or her favorite. Who could forget the

large

canvas bag that was supposed to be Caltiki, the Immortal Monster in the 1959 Italian

movie?

Or the Japanese version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde-The Manster? Other favorites of

mine

include the flaming Winston cigarette filter that was supposed to be a crash-landing

alien

spaceship in Teenage Monster and Allison Hayes as a refugee from a pro basketball

team in

The Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman. (If only she could have wandered across into

Bert I.

Gordon's The Amazing Colossal Man Think of the children if they had

clicked!) Then there

was the wonderful moment in the 1978 film Ruby, a routine terror job about a haunted

drive-in,

when one of the characters punches a button on the Coke machine and gets a cup of

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blood.

Inside the machine, you see, all of the tubes have been hooked up to a severed human

head.

In Children of Cain, a Western horror picture (almost, but not quite, up to the level of Billy the Kid Meets Dracula), John Carradine goes West with barrels of salt water instead of fresh strapped to the sides of his Conestoga wagon. All the better to preserve his collection of severed heads (maybe because the historical period would have made the Coke machine an anachronism). In one of those lost-continent-type pictures-this one starring Cesar Romero all the dinosaurs were cartoons. Nor should we forget Irwin Allen's The Swarm, with its unbelievable matte jobs and its cast of Familiar Faces. Here is a picture that manages to even better Prophecy's time; it is a twelve-million-dollar picture that manages to look like a buck-ninety-eight.

2

From Castle of Frankenstein:

The Blob

This sf-horror comes out as a slightly flat imitation of both "Rebel Without a Cause" and

"The Creeping Unknown." Oozing out-of-space

horror consumes humans until destroyed in ridiculous ending.

This uncharacteristically out-of-patience review of a film which was the first

starring vehicle for

an actor who then billed himself as "Steven McQueen" ignores several fine touches:

the theme

song, for instance, by a group that sounds suspiciously like the Chords doing

outtakes from

"Sh-Boom," is played over a happy little cartoon of expanding blobs. The real blob,

which

arrives on earth inside a hollow meteor, looks at first like a melted blueberry

Popsicle and later

quite a bit like a giant jujube. This film has its genuine moments of unease and

horror: it

smoothly engulfs the arm of a farmer who has been unwise enough to touch it and the

blob

turns a sinister red as the farmer screams in agony; later, after McQueen and his

girl friend

discover the farmer and take him to the local doctor, there is a scary moment when

McQueen

can't locate the blob in the darkened examining room. When he sees it at last, he

throws a

bottle of acid over the thing, which flashes briefly yellow and then returns to its

former ominous

red.

Also, the Coff review is uncharacteristically wrong about the film's conclusion: the

blob

proved immortal. It was frozen and flown up to the Arctic to await the sequel,

Beware the Blob

(also released as Son of the Blob). Perhaps the film's finest moment for those of us who consider ourselves connoisseurs of bad special effects comes when the blob swallows a small diner whole. We see the blob oozing slowly across a color photograph of the diner's

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Admirable. Must have made Bert I. Gordon envious.

Concerning Invasion of the Saucer-Men, a 1957 American-International picture, Coff regained some of its more customary savoir faire:

Ludicrous sf quickie, on lowest teenage level. Space invaders are cute little saucermen

who inject alcohol into victims' veins. The ending is quite funny (hic!).

Invasion of the Saucer-Men comes from AIP's Brass Age (it really can't be called AIP's

Golden Age; that came later, during the spate of films loosely based on the works of Edgar

Allen Poe-most of those were pretty stupid, wandering far afield from the source material, but

at least they were pretty to look at). The picture was shot in seven days, and in the conclusion,

the Heroic Teenagers use their hot-rod headlights to "light" the monsters to death.

The movie

is also notable for the fact that Elisha Cook, Jr., is killed in the first reel, as

he was so often,

and Nick Adams can be seen in the background wearing his hat backwards-what a crazy kid,

right? The monsters are like, all wasted, so let's go down to the malt shop, daddy-O!

In a later example of AIP low-budget mania, *Invasion of the Star Creatures* (1962) , a group

of Army men stranded in the trackless desert encounter a group of female invaders from

space. All of these female invaders have beehive hairdos and look like Jacqueline Kennedy.

Much is made of the fact that these fellows are totally cut off from the outside world and must

deal with the problem themselves, but there are jeep tracks all over the place (not to mention a

lot of foam rocks and, in several scenes, the shadow of the boom mike used to record the

sound). One suspects that the film's utterly sleazy look may have come about because the

producers overspent on star power; the cast list included such well-loved lights of the

American cinema as Bob Ball, Frankie Ray, and Gloria Victor.

Coff had this to say about *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, a 1958 Paramount release which formed the lower half of "summer shocker" double bills along with either *The*

Blob or the hilarious Pat Boone film *Journey to the Center of the Earth*:

Kiddy-oriented sf programmer. Gloria Talbot marries a monster from outer space which is disguised to look like Tom Tryon. Good argument against hasty marriages, but not much of a movie.

Still, this one was a lot of fun, if only for the once-in-a-lifetime chance it offered to see Tom

Tryon with a snout. And before leaving this one and proceeding on to what (sadly) may be the

worst of the Grade-Z movies, I'd like to say something a little more serious about the peculiar

relationship which obtains between terrible horror movies (of which there are a dozen for each

good one, as this chapter testifies) and the genuine fan of the genre.

The relationship is not entirely masochistic, as the foregoing may make it seem. A film like

Alien or Jaws is, for either the true fan or simply the ordinary moviegoer who has a

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sometime

interest in the macabre, like a wide, deep vein of gold that doesn't even have to be mined; it

can simply be dug out of the hillside. But that isn't mining, remember; it's just digging. The true

horror film aficionado is more like a prospector with his panning equipment or his wash-wheel,

spending long periods going patiently through common dirt, looking for the bright
blink of gold
dust or possibly even a small nugget or two. Such a working miner is not looking for
the big
strike, which may come tomorrow or the day after or never; he has put those
illusions behind
him. He's only looking for a livin' wage, something to keep him going yet awhile
longer.

As a result, horror-movie fans communicate their likes to each other by a kind of
grapevine
which is part word of mouth, part fanzine reviews, part convention-hall chatter at
such
meetings as the World Fantasy Convention, the Kubla Khan Ate, or the IguanaCon. Word
gets
around. Long before David Cronenberg made something of a splash with They Came from
Within, fans were muttering that he was someone to watch on the basis of an earlier
film-an
extremely low-budget flick called Rabid, starring X-rated queen Marilyn (Behind the
Green
Door) Chambers-and Cronenberg got a bravura performance out of her, by the way. My
agent, Kirby McCauley, raves about a small picture called Ritual, filmed in Canada
and starring
Hal Holbrook. These films don't get wide American release, but if you watch the
papers
faithfully, you may see one of them playing at the drive-in as a pick-up second
feature below

some overrated major studio flick. Similarly, I heard about a little-known early John Carpenter film called Assault on Precinct 13 from Peter Straub, the author of Ghost Story and If You Could See Me Now. Done on a shoestring (and Carpenter's first feature, Dark Star, is reputed to have cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$60,000 a sum that makes even George Romero look like Dino DeLaurentiis), Carpenter's talent as a director nonetheless shines through, and Carpenter went on to do Halloween and The Fog. These are the nuggets, the horror-film fan's reward for sifting through films like Planet of the Vampires and The Monster from Green Hell. My own "discovery" (if you don't object to the word) is a little film called Tourist Trap, starring Chuck Connors. Connors himself isn't very good in the film-he tries gamely, but he's simply miscast. Yet the film wields an eerie, spooky power. Wax figures begin to move and come to life in a ruined, out-of-the-way tourist resort; there are a number of effective, atmospheric shots of the dummies' blank eyes and reaching hands, and the special effects are effective. As a film that deals with the queer power that inanimate dummies, mannequins, and human replicas can sometimes cast over us, it is

a

more effective film than the expensive and ill-advised film made from William

Goldman's

bestseller, *Magic*.*

But to get back to *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*: bad as it is, there is one

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absolutely

chilling moment in the movie. I won't say that it's worth the price of admission,

but it works . . .

boy, does it work! Tryon has married his girl friend (Gloria Talbot) and they are on

their

honeymoon. While she stretches out on the bed, dressed in the obligatory filmy white

nightgown and waiting for the consummation of all those steamy clinches on the

beach, Tryon,

who is still a good-looking man and who was even better looking twenty years ago,

goes out

on the balcony of their hotel room for a cigarette. A thunderstorm is brewing, and a

sharp

stroke of lightning abruptly renders that handsome face transparent for a moment. We

see the

horrible alien face beneath-runnelled and knotted and warty. It is a "seat-jumper"

for sure,

and during the fade-out we perhaps have time to think about the consummation to

follow . . .

and gulp.

If movies such as *Tourist Trap* and *Rituals* are the nuggets fans sometimes find by sticking around for the B picture (and no one is so optimistic as the dyed-in-the-wool fan), a moment such as this one is the equivalent of the gold dust that can sometimes be panned out by the faithful toiler. Or to put it another way, there is that marvelous Sherlock Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," where the Christmas goose, when slit open, yields up the beautiful and priceless stone that has been lodged in its gullet. You sit through a lot of shlock, and maybe-just maybe-there is that frisson that makes it at least partially worthwhile.

*Home Box Office, in its endless quest for prime-time filler, is now making many of these "little" films available in a way that such spotty distributors as New World Pictures have never been able to do. Of course, there's no shortage of dreck on HBO either, as any subscriber will tell you; still, there is an occasional prize in the pay-TV box, which is usually full of such mouldy cinematic Cracker jacks as *Guyana: Cult of the Damned* and *Moment by Moment*. In the last year or so HBO has offered Croenenberg's *The Brood* and an interesting AIP picture called *The Evictors* (starring Vic Morrow and Michael Parks), which got no American

theatrical distribution . . . and

Tourist Trap.

There is no such frisson in Plan 9 from Outer Space, unfortunately, to which I

reluctantly

award the booby-prize as the worst horror film ever made. Yet there is nothing funny

about this

one, no matter how many times it has been laughed at in those mostly witless

compendiums

which celebrate the worst of everything. There's nothing funny about watching a Bela

Lugosi

(who may actually have been a stand-in) wracked with pain, a morphine monkey on his

back,

creeping around a southern California development with his Dracula cape pulled up

over his

nose.

Lugosi died shortly after this abysmal, exploitative, misbegotten piece of trash was

released,

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and I've always wondered in my heart if maybe poor old Bela didn't die as much of

shame as

of the many illnesses that were overwhelming him. It was a sad and squalid coda to a

great

career. Lugosi was buried (at his own request) in his Dracula cape, and one like to

think-or

hope-that it served him better in death than it did in the miserable waste of

celluloid that

marked his last screen appearance.

3

Before we move on to horror on TV, where failures in the genre have been every bit

as

common (but somehow less spectacular), it seems appropriate to finish here by asking

a

question: Why have there been so many bad horror movies?

Before trying to answer that, let's be honest and say that a great many movies are

very

bad-not all the turkeys are gobbling in the horror pen, if you take my meaning.

Consider Myra

Breckinridge. Valley of the Dolls, The Adventurers, and Bloodline . . . to mention

just a few.

Even Alfred Hitchcock produced one of those Thanksgiving birds, and unfortunately,

it was his

last picture: Family Plot, with Bruce Dern and Karen Black. And these pictures only

scratch the

surface of a list that could continue on for a hundred pages or more. Probably more.

There's an impulse to say something's wrong here. There may well be. If another

business-United Airlines, let us say, or IBM-ran their affairs the way 20th

Century-Fox ran

the making of Cleopatra, their boards of directors would soon be down at the local

7-11 store,

buying pizza mix with foodstamps-or maybe the stockholders would just break down the

door

and wheel in the guillotine. It seems almost incredible to believe that any major

studio could

even approach the brink of bankruptcy in a country that loves the movies as much as

this one

does; one might as well try to imagine, you might think, Caesar's Palace or the

Dunes wiped

out by a single crapshooter. But in fact there is not one major American film studio

which has

not at least once during the thirty-year period under discussion here tottered on

the brink.

MGM is perhaps the most infamous case, and for a period of seven years the MGM lion

ceased to roar almost entirely. Perhaps significantly, during this period when MGM

was leaving

the unreal world of the movies and pinning its hopes for corporate survival upon the

unreal

gambling world (the MGM Grand in Vegas, surely one of the world's more vulgar

pleasure

domes), their one major success was a horror movie Michael Crichton's Westworld, in

which a

disintegrating Yul Brynner, dressed in black and looking like a nightmare revenant

from The

Magnificent Seven, intones again and again: "Draw. Draw. Draw." They draw . . . and

lose. Yul

is pretty fast, even with his circuits showing.

Is this, you ask me, any way to run a railroad?

My own answer is no . . . but the failure of so many films released by "the majors" seems

more explicable to me than the failure of so many of the horror films released by what Variety

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calls "the indies." At this writing, three of my novels have been released as films:

Carrie

(United Artists/theatrical/1976) 'Salem's Lot (Warners/television/ 1979), and The Shining

(Warners/theatrical/1980), and in all three cases I feel that I have been fairly treated . . . and

yet the clearest emotion in my mind is not pleasure but a mental sigh of relief.

When dealing

with the American cinema, you feel like you won if you just broke even.

Once you've seen the film industry's workings from the inside, you realize that it is a creative

nightmare. It becomes difficult to understand how anything of quality-an Alien, a Place in the

Sun, a Breaking Away-can be made. As in the Army, the first rule of studio filmmaking is

CYA: Cover Your Ass. On any critical decision, it is well to consult at least half a dozen people,

so that someone else's butt will go up in that fabled sling if the film drops dead and twenty

million dollars goes swirling down the toilet. And if your butt must go up, it then becomes possible to make sure it doesn't go up alone.

There are, of course, filmmakers who either don't know this kind of fear or whose particular visions are so clear and fierce that such fear of failure never becomes a factor in the equation.

Brian De Palma comes to mind, and Francis Coppola (who teetered on the edge of being fired from The Godfather shoot for months, and yet persisted in his own particular vision of the film),

Sam Peckinpah, Don Siegel, Steven Spielberg. * This factor of vision is so real and apparent that even when a director such as Stanley Kubrick makes such a maddening, perverse, and disappointing film as The Shining, it somehow retains a brilliance that is inarguable; it is simply there.

The real danger inherent in studio films is mediocrity. A clinker like Myra Breckinridge has its own horrid fascination-it is like watching slow-motion footage of a head-on collision between a Cadillac and a Lincoln Continental. But what are we to make of films like Nightwing, Capricorn One, Players, or The Cassandra Crossing? These are not bad films-not the way

that Robot Monster or Teenage Monster are bad, certainly-but they are mediocre.

They're

blah. You leave the theater after one of these films with no taste in your mouth but

the popcorn

you ate. They are films where, halfway through the second reel, you begin wishing

for a

cigarette.

As the cost of production balloons up and up, the risks of going for all of it

become greater

and greater, and even a Roger Maris looked pretty stupid when he was badly fooled,

totally

overswung the ball, and fell on his ass. The same obtains in films, and I would

predict-with

some hesitation, because the film industry is such a crazy place-that we will never

again see

such a colossal risk as the one Coppola took with Apocalypse Now or the one Cimino

was

allowed to take with Heaven's Gate. If anyone tries, that dry, dusty snapping sound

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you'll hear

coming from the West Coast will be the accountants of every major studio out there

snapping

the corporate checkbooks closed.

But the indies . . . what about the indies? There is less to lose here, certainly;

in fact Chris

Steinbrunner, an amusing guy and an astute follower of the films, likes to call many of these

flicks "backyard movies." By his definition, The Horror of Party Beach was a backyard film; so

were The Flesh Eaters and Tobe Hooper's The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. (Night of the Living

Dead, which was made by an existing film company with access to TV studio facilities in

Pittsburgh, doesn't qualify as "backyard.") It's a good term for those films made by amateurs,

gifted or otherwise, on a shoestring budget with no major distribution

guaranteed-these films

are the much more expensive equivalent of the unsolicited manuscript. These are guys who

are shooting with nothing to lose, shooting for the moon. And yet most of these films are just

awful.

*Compare, for instance, the single and unified vision which powers Spielberg's Jaws to the sequel, which was

produced by committee and directed by the unfortunate Jeannot Szwarc, who was brought in from the bullpen in

the late innings to mop up, and who deserved better.

Why?

Exploitation, that's why.

It was exploitation that caused Lugosi to put finish to his career by creeping

around a
suburban tract development in his Dracula cape; it was exploitation that prompted
the making
of Invasion of the Star Creatures and Don't Look in the Basement (and believe me, I
didn't
have to keep telling myself it was only a movie; I knew what it was-in a word,
wretched). After
sex, low-budget moviemakers are attracted to horror because it seems to be a genre
which is
easily exploited-an easy lay, like the sort of girl every guy wanted to date (at
least once) in
high school. Even good horror can sometimes have a tawdry carnival freak-show feel .
. . but
it's a feel that can be deceptive.
And if it is courtesy of the indies that we have seen the greatest failures (the
Ro-Man's
war-surplus shortwave/ bubble machine), then it is also courtesy of them that we
have seen
some of the most unlikely triumphs. The Horror of Party Beach and Night of the
Living Dead
were made on similar budgets; the difference is George Romero and his vision of what
the
horror movie is and what the horror movie is supposed to do. In the former we have
the
monsters attacking a slumber party in a scene which becomes hilarious; in the latter

we have

an old woman peering nearsightedly at a bug on a tree and then munching it up. You

hear your

mouth trying to laugh and scream at the same time, and that is Romero's remarkable

achievement.

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Werewolf in a Girls' Dormitory and Dementia-13 were made on similar nothing budgets;

here

the difference is Francis Coppola, who created an almost unbearable atmosphere of

mounting

menace in the latter, a black-and-white, rapidly shot suspense movie (which was made

on

location in Ireland, for tax purposes).

It is, perhaps, too easy to become enamoured of bad films as "camp"; the great

success of

The Rocky Horror Picture Show may point to nothing so much as the degeneration of

the

average moviegoer's critical capacity. It might be well to go back to the basics and

remember

that the difference between bad movies and good (or between bad art-or nonart-and

good or

great art) is talent, and the inventive utilization of that talent. The worst movie

sends its own

message, which is simply to stay away from other movies done by these people; if you

have

seen one film by Wes Craven, for instance, it is safe enough, I think, to skip the others. The genre labors under enough critical disapproval and outright dislike; one need not make a bad situation worse by underwriting films of porno-violence and those which want to plunder our pocketbooks and no more. And there is no need to do it, because even in the movies there is no real pricetag on quality . . . not when Brian De Palma found it possible to make a fine, scary film like Sisters for something like \$800,000.

The reason for seeing bad movies, I suppose, is that you don't know it's going to be bad until you've seen it for yourself-as previously pointed out, most movie critics cannot be trusted here. Pauline Kael writes well, and Gene Shalit demonstrates a certain rather tiresome surface wit, but when these two-and other critics-go to see a horror movie, they don't know what they are seeing.* The true fan does; he or she has developed his or her basis for comparison over a long and sometimes painful span of time. The real movie freak is as much an appreciator as the regular visitor to art galleries or museums, and this basis for comparison is the bedrock upon whatever theses or point (s) of view he or she may develop must

stand. For

the horror fan, films such as Exorcist II form the setting for the occasional bright

gemstone that

is discovered in the darkness of a sleazy second-run moviehouse: Kirby McCauley's

Rituals or

my own low-budget favorite, Tourist Trap.

You don't appreciate cream unless you've drunk a lot of milk, and maybe you don't

even

appreciate milk unless you've drunk some that's gone sour. Bad films may sometimes

be

amusing, sometimes even successful, but their only real usefulness is to form that

basis of

comparison: to define positive values in terms of their own negative charm. They

show us what

to look for because it is missing in themselves. After that has been determined, it

becomes, I

think, actively dangerous to hold on to these bad films . . . and they must be

discarded. **

*The one exception is Judith Crist, who seems to genuinely like horror movies and

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who is often able to look

past a poverty-row budget to whatever is working there-I've always wondered what she

made of Night of the

Living Dead.

** If you are interested in my own determination of the best horror movies of the

last thirty years, see Appendix

I.

CHAPTER VIII

The Glass Teat, or, This Monster

Was Brought to You by Gainesburgers

ALL THOSE OF YOU out there among the great unwashed who ever believed that TV sucks were dead wrong, you see; as Harlan Ellison pointed out in his sometimes amusing,

sometimes scathing essays on television, TV does not suck; it is sucked. Ellison called his

two-volume diatribe on the subject The Glass Teat, and if you've not read it, be aware that it

comes recommended as a kind of compass with this particular stretch of the territory. I read

the book with amazed absorption three years ago, the fact that Ellison had devoted valuable

time and space to such forgettable series of yesteryear as Alias Smith and Jones barely

obtruding on a total volcanic effect that made me suspect I was experiencing something

roughly similar to a six-hour rant delivered by Fidel Castro. Always assuming that Fidel was

really on that day.

Ellison circles back and back to television in his work, like a man held in thrall by a snake he

knows to be ultimately deadly. For no apparent reason, the longish introduction to

Strange

Wine (a book we'll discuss at some length next chapter), Ellison's 1978 collection of short

stories, is a diatribe on TV titled "Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs!

And You Don't

Look So Terrific Yourself."

When you strip Ellison's TV-rap to its core, it is simple enough and not blazingly original (for

blazing originality, you have to read how he says it) : TV is a spoiler, Ellison says. It spoils

story; it spoils those who make the stories; eventually it spoils those who watch the stories; the

milk from this particular teat is poisoned. This is a thesis I would agree with completely, but let

me point out two facts.

Harlan has a TV. A big one.

I have a TV which is even bigger than Harlan's. It is, in fact, a Panasonic CinemaVision

which dominates one whole corner of my living room.

Mea culpa, all right.

I can rationalize Harlan's TV and my own monster, although I cannot completely excuse

either of us-and I should add that Ellison is a bachelor, and he can watch the thing twenty

hours a day if he wants and hurt nobody but himself. I, on the other hand, have three young

children in the house-ten, eight, and four-who are exposed to this gadget; to its possible radiation, its untrue colors, and its magic window on a vulgar, tawdry world where cameras

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ogle the butts of Playboy bunnies and linger over endless visions of an upper-upper-upper-middle-class materialism that, for most Americans, has never existed and

never will. Mass starvation is a way of life in Biafra; in Cambodia, dying children are shitting out

their own collapsed intestines; in the Middle East a kind of messianic madness is in danger of

swallowing up all rationality; and here at home we sit mesmerized by Richard Dawson on

Family Feud and watch Buddy Ebsen as Barnaby Jones. I think my own three kids have a better fix on the reality of Gilligan, the Skipper, and Mr. Howell than they do on the reality of

what happened at Three Mile Island in March of 1979. In fact, I know they do.

Horror has not fared particularly well on TV, if you except something like the six o'clock

news, where footage of black GIs with their legs blown off, villages and kids on fire, bodies in

trenches, and whole swatches of jungle being coated with good old Agent Orange sent kids

into the streets, where they would march and light candles and say dopey, talismanic
"in"

things to each other until we withdrew, the North Vietnamese took over, and more
starvation

on mass levels resulted-not to mention opening the way for such really upstanding,
humanitarian personages as Cambodia's Pol Pot. The whole sour stew sure wasn't much
like

a TV show, was it? Just ask yourself if any chain of events so ridiculous could ever
have

happened on Hawaii Five-O. The answer is of course not. If Steve McGarrett had been
President from 1968 to 1976, the whole abortion could have been avoided. Steve,
Danny, and

Chin Ho would have cleared the mess up.

The sort of horrors we have been discussing in this book labor under the very fact
of their

unreality (a fact which Harlan Ellison himself recognizes well; he refuses to allow
the word

fantasy to be printed on book covers as a descriptive term for the stories inside).

We have

treated the question "Why do you want to write horror stories in a world that is so
full of real

horrors?"; I am now suggesting that the reason horror has done so poorly, by and
large, on TV,

is a statement which is closely related to that question, to wit: "It is very
difficult to write a

successful horror story in a world which is so full of real horrors." A ghost in the

turret room of a

Scottish castle just cannot compete with thousand-megaton warheads, CBW bugs, or

nuclear

power plants that have apparently been put together from Aurora model kits by

ten-year-olds

with poor eye-hand coordination. Even Old Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

pales beside those dead sheep in Utah, killed by one of Our Finer Nerve Gases. If

the wind

had been blowing the other way when that happened, Salt Lake City might have gotten

a really

good dose of what killed the sheep. And, my good friends, someday the wind is not

going to be

blowing the right way. You may count on it; tell your Congressman I said so. Sooner

or later

the wind always changes.

Well, horror can be done. That emotion can still be triggered by people who are

dedicated

to doing it, and there's something optimistic in the fact that people can still, in

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spite of all the

world's real horrors, be brought to the point of the scream by something that is

patently

impossible. It can be done by the writer or the director . . . if their hands are

untied.

For the writer, the most galling thing about TV must be that he or she is forbidden from bringing all of his or her powers to bear; the predicament of the TV writer is strikingly similar to the predicament of the human race as envisioned in Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron," where bright people are fitted with electro-shock caps to disrupt their thinking periodically, agile people are fitted with weights, and people with great artistic talent are forced to wear heavy, distorting glasses to destroy their clearer perception of the world around them. As a result, a perfect state of equality has been achieved . . . but at what a price. The ideal writer for the TV medium is a fella or a gal with a smidgen of talent, a lot of gall, and the soul of a drone. In Hollywood's current and exquisitely vulgar parlance, he or she must "give good meeting." Let any of these qualifications be tampered with, and the writer is apt to start feeling like poor old Harrison Bergeron. It has made Ellison, who wrote for Star Trek, The Outer Limits, and The Young Lawyers, to name just a few, a little bit crazy, I think. But if he weren't, it would be impossible to respect him. His craziness is a kind of Purple Heart, like

Joseph (Police Story) Wambaugh's ulcers. There is no reason why a writer cannot make a living doing TV on a constant week-in-week-out basis; all that writer really needs is a low Alpha-wave pattern and a perception of writing as the mental equivalent of bucking crates of soda up onto a Coca-Cola truck. Part of this is the result of federal regulation and part of it is proof of the maxim which states that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. TV is in almost every American home, and the financial stakes are enormous. As a result, television has become more and more cautious over the years. It has become like a fat old spayed tomcat dedicated to the preservation of the status quo and to the concept of LOP-Least Objectionable Programming. Television is, in fact, like that fat, wimpy kid who most of us can remember from our childhood neighborhoods, the big, slack kid who would cry if you gave him two-for-flinching, the kid who always looked guilty when the teacher asked who put the mouse in her drawer, the kid who was always picked on because he was always afraid of being picked on. Now the simple fact of horror fiction in whatever medium you choose . . . the bedrock of

horror fiction, we might say, is simply this: you gotta scare the audience. Sooner or later you gotta put on the gruesome mask and go booga-booga. I can remember an official in the fledgling New York Mets organization worrying about the improbable crowds that gang of happy-go-lucky schmucks was drawing. "Sooner or later we're going to have to sell these

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danse macabre Stephen King people some steak along with the sizzle," was how this fellow expressed it. The same is true with horror. The reader will not feed forever on innuendo and vapors; sooner or later even the great H. P. Lovecraft had to produce whatever was lurking in the crypt or in the steeple.

Most of the great film directors in the field have chosen to get the horror up front; to cram a large block of it down the viewer's throat until he almost chokes on it and then lead the viewer on, teasing him, drawing every cent of the psychological interest due on that original scare.

The primer that every would-be horror director studies in this matter is, of course, the definitive horror film of the period we're discussing-Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho. Here is a

movie where blood was kept to a minimum and terror was kept to a maximum. In the

famous

shower scene we see Janet Leigh; we see the knife; but we never see the knife in Janet Leigh.

You may think you saw it, but you did not. Your imagination saw it, and that is Hitchcock's

great triumph. All the blood we see in the shower is swirling down the drain. *

Psycho has never been shown during prime time as a network movie, but once that forty-five seconds in the shower has been removed, the film could almost be a made-for-TV

movie (in content, anyway; in terms of style, it is light-years from the run-of-the-tube TV flick).

In effect, what Hitchcock does is serve us a big raw steak of terror not even a quarter of the

way through his film. The rest, even the climax, is really only sizzle. And without that forty-five

seconds, the film becomes nearly humdrum. In spite of its reputation, Psycho is an admirably

restrained horror movie; Hitchcock even elected to shoot in black and white so that the blood in

the shower scene would not look like blood at all, and one oft-told tale-almost surely

apocryphal-is that Hitch toyed with

*I would date the more overtly violent horror movies not from Psycho but from two nonhorror movies, shot in

living, bloody color: Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch and Arthur Penn's Bonnie and

Clyde.

shooting the movie in color-except for the shower scene, which would be in black and white.

As we enter upon our discussion of horror on television, always keep this fact somewhere

near to hand: television has really asked the impossible of its handful of horror programs-to

terrify without really terrifying, to horrify without really horrifying, to sell audiences a lot of sizzle

and no steak.

Earlier on I said I could rationalize if not excuse the fact of Ellison's TV and my own, and the

rationalization goes back to what I've already said about really awful movies. Of course, TV is

far too homogenized to cough up anything as charmingly awful as *The Giant Spider Invasion*

with its fur-covered Volkswagen, but every now and then talent shines through and something

good turns up . . . and even if the something is not out-and-out good, like

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Spielberg's *Duel* or

John Carpenter's *Someone's Watching Me*, the viewer may find at least some cause for hope.

More child than adult in pursuit of his particular taste, hope springs eternal in the breast of the

fantasy-horror fan. You tune in, knowing almost certainly that it's going to be bad yet hoping against hope-irrationally-that it is going to be good. Excellence occurs rarely, but every now and then a program will come along which at least bucks the odds enough to produce something interesting, such as the late 1979 NBC-TV movie *The Aliens Are Coming*. Every now and then we are given some cause for hope. And with that hope to guard us against the dreck like a magic talisman, let us go and make our visit. Just close your eyes while we dance through the cathode tube here; it has a bad habit of first hypnotizing and then anesthetizing. Just ask Harlan.

2

Probably the best horror series ever put on TV was *Thriller*, which ran on NBC from September of 1960 until the summer of 1962-really only two seasons plus reruns. It was a period before television began to face up to an increasing barrage of criticism about its depiction of violence, a barrage that really began with the JFK assassination, grew heavier following the assassinations of RFK and Martin Luther King, and finally caused the medium to dissolve into a sticky syrup of situation comedies-history may record that dramatic

television

finally gave up the ghost and slid down the tubes with a hearty cry of "Na-noo, na-noo!"

The contemporaries of Thriller were also weekly bloodbaths; it was the time of The Untouchables, starring Robert Stack as the unflappable Eliot Ness and featuring the gruesome

deaths of hoodlums without number (1959-1963) ; Peter Gunn (1958-1961) ; and Cain's Hundred (1961-1962), to name just a few. It was TV's violent era. As a result, after a slow first

thirteen weeks, Thriller was able to become something more than the stock imitation of Alfred

Hitchcock Presents that it was apparently meant to be (early episodes dealt with cheating

husbands trying to hypnotize their wives into walking over high cliffs, poisoning Aunt Martha to

inherit her fortune so that the gambling debts could be paid off, and all that tiresome sort of

thing) and took on a tenebrous life of its own. For the brief period of its run between January of

1961 and April of 1962-perhaps fifty-six of its seventy-eight total episodes-it really was one of

a kind, and its like was never seen on TV again.

Thriller was an anthology-format show (as all of the supernaturalterror TV programs which

have enjoyed even a modicum of success have been) hosted by Boris Karloff. Karloff had

appeared on TV before, shortly after the Universal horror wave of the early to mid-thirties

finally ran weakly out in that series of comedies in the late forties. This earlier program,

telecast on the fledgling ABC-TV network, had a brief run in the autumn of 1949. It

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was

originally titled Starring Boris Karloff, fared no better following a title change to Mystery

Playhouse Starring Boris Karloff, and was canceled. In feeling and tone, however, it was

startlingly similar to Thriller, which came along eleven years later. Here is the summary of one

plot from Starring Boris Karloff; it might as well be a Thriller episode:

An English hangman unduly enjoys his work, which brings him payment of five guineas per hanging. He revels in the snap of the victim's neck, and the dangling arms. When his

pregnant wife discovers his true occupation she leaves him. Twenty years later the hangman is called upon to execute a young man, which he does with pleasure, despite the

fact that he has secret evidence (of the youth's innocence) . . . Only then is he confronted

by his ex-wife, who tells him he has just hung his own son. Enraged, he strangles his wife

and is subsequently sent to the gallows himself. Another hangman collects five golden guineas.*

The plot is kissing cousin to an episode from Thriller's second season. In that one, the executioner was French, in charge of the guillotine instead of the gallows, and was presented as a sympathetic character

*From The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows, 1946-Present, edited by Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979). P. 586.

(although his work has apparently not affected his appetite; he's a mountain of a man). He is due to execute a particularly foul murderer the next day at dawn. The killer has not given up hope, however; his girl friend has wormed her way into the lonely headsman's affections, and the two of them hope to take advantage of an old loophole in the law (and I should say here that I have no idea if the loophole is a genuine one, like the American concept of double jeopardy, or simply the plot device of Cornell Woolrich, who wrote the story) which holds that if the executioner croaks on the day he is to do business, that day's condemned prisoner walks free.

The lady serves the executioner a huge breakfast laced with strong poison. He eats heartily, as usual, and then sets off for the prison. He's halfway there when the first agonizing pains strike. The rest of the episode is a chilly exercise in suspense as the camera cuts back and forth between the cell of the condemned man and the executioner's agonized walk through the streets of Paris. The executioner, obviously a type-A personality, is determined to do his duty.

He reaches the prison, collapses halfway across the courtyard . . . and then begins to crawl toward the guillotine. The prisoner is brought out, dressed in the proper open-collared white shirt (the screenwriter had obviously read his Tale of Two Cities) and the two of them converge

Page 174

danse macabre Stephen King at the guillotine. Now at the end of his rope (ha-ha), the executioner nevertheless manages to get the screaming prisoner's head in the stock and positioned over the basket before collapsing, stone dead.

The condemned prisoner, on his knees with his butt poking up- looking a bit like a turkey caught in a shakepole fence-begins screaming that he's free! Free, do you hear?

Ah-hah-hah-hah! The doctor who was to pronounce the condemned dead now finds himself called upon to perform that duty upon the erstwhile executioner. He tries for a pulse and finds none-but when he drops the executioner's wrist, it falls on the guillotine's lever. The blade swishes down-thud! We fade out, knowing that rough justice has been done. Karloff was sixty-four at the beginning of Thriller's two-year run, and not in the best of health; he suffered from a chronically bad back and had to wear weights to stand upright. Some of these infirmities dated back to his original film appearance as Frankenstein's monster in 1932. He no longer starred in all the programs-many of the guest stars on the Thriller program were nonentities who went on to become fullfledged nobodies (one of those guest stars, Reggie Nalder, went on to play the vampire Barlow in the CBS-TV film version of 'Salem's Lot) -but fans will remember a few memorable occasions when he did ("The Strange Door," for instance). The old magic was still there, still intact. Lugosi might have finished his career in misery and poverty, but Karloff, despite a few embarrassments like Frankenstein 1970, went out as he came in: as a gentleman. Produced by William Frye, Thriller was the first television program to discover the goldmine

in those back issues of *Weird Tales*, the memory of which had been kept alive up until then mostly in the hearts of fans, a few quickie paperback anthologies, and, of course, in those limited-edition Arkham House anthologies. One of the most significant things about the *Thriller* series from the standpoint of the horror fan was that it began to depend more and more upon the work of writers who had published in those "shudder pulps" . . . the writers who, in the period of the twenties, thirties, and forties, had begun to guide horror out of the Victorian-Edwardian ghost-story channel it had been in for so long, and toward our modern perception of what the horror story is and what it should do. Robert Bloch was represented by "The Hungry Glass," a story in which the mirrors of an old house harbor a grisly secret; Robert E. Howard's "Pigeons from Hell," one of the finest horror stories of our century, was adapted, and remains the favorite of many who remember *Thriller* with fondness.* Other episodes include "A Wig for Miss DeVore," in which a red wig keeps an actress magically young . . . until the final five minutes of the program, when she loses it-and everything else. Miss DeVore's

lined, sunken face; the young man staggering blindly down the stairs of the decaying bayou

mansion with a hatchet buried in his head ("Pigeons from Hell"); the fellow who sees the faces

of his fellow men and women turned into hideous monstrosities when he puts on a
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special pair

of glasses ("The Cheaters," from another Bloch story)-these may not have constituted fine

art, but in Thriller's run, we find those qualities above all others by fans of the genre: a literate

story coupled with the genuine desire to frighten the viewer into spasms.

Years after Thriller, a production company associated with NBC-the network upon which

Thriller was telecast-optioned three stories

*And some say it was the single most frightening story ever done on TV. I would disagree with that. My own

nominee for that honor would be the final episode of a little-remembered program called Bus Stop (adapted from

the William Inge play and film). The series, a straight drama show, was canceled following the furor over an

episode starring then rock star Fabian Forte as a psychopathic rapist-the episode was based on a Tom Wicker

novel. The final episode, however, deviated wildly into the supernatural, and for me, Robert Bloch's adaptation of

his own short story "I Kiss Your Shadow" has never been beaten on TV-and rarely anywhere else-for eerie, mounting horror.

from my 1978 collection, *Night Shift*, and invited me to do the screenplay. One of these stories was a piece called "Strawberry Spring," about a psychopathic Jack-the-Ripper-type killer who is roaming a fogbound college campus. About a month after turning the script in, I got a call from an NBC munchkin at Standards and Practices (read: The Department of Censorship).

The knife my killer used to commit his murders had to go, the munchkin said. The killer could stay, but the knife had to go. Knives were too phallic. I suggested we turn the killer into a strangler. The munchkin evinced great enthusiasm. I hung up, feeling like a very brilliant fellow, and turned the stabber into, a strangler. The script was finally coughed out of the network's

large and voracious gullet by Standards and Practices, however, strangler and all. Too gruesome and intense was the final verdict.

I guess none of them remembered Patricia Barry in "A Wig for Miss DeVore."

3

Blackness on the TV screen.

Then there's a picture there-some kind of picture-but it's rolling helplessly at

first, then

losing horizontal resolution.

Black again, broken by a single wavy white line, oscillating hypnotically.

The voice accompanying all this is quiet, reasonable.

"There it nothing wrong with your TV set. We are controlling transmission, We can control

the vertical. We can control the horizontal. For the next hour we will control all you see and

hear and think. You are watching a drama which reaches from the inner mind to . . . the Outer

Limits."

Nominally science fiction, more actually a horror program, The Outer Limits was, perhaps,

after Thriller, the best program of its type ever to run on network TV. Purists will

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scream

nonsense and blasphemy; that not even Thriller could compete with the immortal

Twilight

Zone. That The Twilight Zone is damn near immortal is something I will not argue with; in big

city markets like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco it seems to run eternally, hallelujah, world without end, sandwiched into its own twilight zone just

after the late

evening news and just before the PTL Club. Perhaps only such ancient sitcoms as I

Love Lucy

and My Little Margie can compete with The Twilight Zone for that sort of fuzzy, black-and-white, vampiristic life which syndication allows.

But, with a dozen or so notable exceptions, The Twilight Zone had very little to do with the

sort of horror fiction we're dealing with here. It was a program which specialized in moral tales,

many of them smarmy (such as the one where Barry Morse buys a player piano which causes

his guests to reveal their true selves; the piano ends up causing him to admit that he is a

selfish little sonofabitch) ; many others well meant but simplistic and almost painfully corny (as

in the one where the sun does not rise because the atmosphere of human injustice has just

gotten too black, folks, too black-the radio announcer gravely reports that things are

particularly black over Dallas and Selma, Alabama Get it, guys? Get it?).

Other episodes

of The Twilight Zone were really little more than sentimental riffs on old supernatural themes:

Art Carney discovers he really is Santa Claus after all; the tired commuter (James Daly) finds

peace in an idyllic, bucolic little town called Willoughby.

The Twilight Zone did occasionally strike notes of horror-the best of these vibrate

in the

back teeth years later-and we will discuss some of these before we finish with the Magic Box.

But for sheer hard-edged clarity of concept, The Twilight Zone really could not match The

Outer Limits, which ran from September of 1963 until January of 1965. The program's executive producer was Leslie Stevens; its line-producer was Joseph Stefano, who wrote the

screenplay for Hitchcock's Psycho and an eerie little exercise in terror called Eye of the Cat a

year or two later. Stefano's vision of what the program was about was an extraordinarily clear

one. Each episode, he insisted, had to have a "bear"-some sort of monstrous creature that

would make an appearance before the station break at the half-hour. In some cases the bear

was not harmful in and of itself, but you could bet that before the end of the show, some

outside force-usually a villainous mad scientist-would cause it to go on a rampage.

My

favorite Outer Limits "bear" literally came out of the woodwork (in an episode titled, surprisingly

enough, "It Came Out of the Woodwork") and was sucked into a housewife's vacuum cleaner,

where it began to grow . . . and grow . . . and grow.

Other "bears" included a Welsh coal miner (played by David McCallum) who is given an

evolutionary "trip" forward in time some two million years. He comes back with a huge bald

head which dwarfs his pallid, sickly looking face, and Lays Waste to the Neighborhood. Harry

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Guardino was menaced by a huge "ice creature"; the first astronauts on Mars, in an episode

written by Jerry Sohl (a science fiction novelist perhaps best known for Costigan's Needle),

were menaced by a gigantic sand snake. In the pilot episode, "The Galaxy Being," a creature

of pure energy is accidentally absorbed into a radio telescope on earth and is finally

dispatched by being overfed (shades of that old Richard Carlson meller, The Magnetic Monster!) Harlan Ellison wrote two episodes, "Soldier" and "Demon with a Glass Hand," the

latter considered by the editor of The Science Fiction Encyclopedia and others to be perhaps

the finest episode of the series, which also included many scripts by Stefano and one by a

young man named Robert Towne, who would go on to write Chinatown. *

The cancellation of The Outer Limits was more due to stupid programming on the part of its

parent network, ABC, than to any real lack of interest, even though the show had

become

slightly flabby in the second season following Stefano's departure. To some extent

it could be

said that when Stefano left, he took all the good bears with him. The series was

never quite the

same. Still, a good many programs have been able to endure a flabby stretch without

cancellation (TV is, after all, a pretty flabby medium). But when ABC switched The

Outer Limits

from its Monday-night time slot, where it was up against two fading game shows, to

Saturday

night-a night when the younger audience The Outer Limits was aimed at was either at

the

movies or just out cruising-it faded quietly from the scene.

We have mentioned syndication briefly, but the only fantasy program which can be

seen

regularly on the independent TV stations is The Twilight Zone, which was, by and

large,

nonviolent. Thriller can be seen late at night in certain big-city markets that have

one or more

of those independent stations, but a run of The Outer Limits is a much rarer catch.

Although it

was presented, during its first run, in what is now considered "the family hour," a

change in

mores has made it one of those "iffy" programs for the independents, who feel safer

running

sitcoms, game shows, and movies (not to mention the old

put-yourhands-on-your-TV-set-brother-and-you-will-be-healed! bit).

And by the way, if you get it in your area, warm up the old Betamax and send me the complete catalogue by way of the publisher. On second thought, you better not. It's probably

illegal. But treasure the run while you've got it; like Thriller, the like of The Outer Limits will not

be seen again. Even The Wonderful World of Disney is going off the air after a twenty-six-year run.

*For much of this material I am indebted to the entry on The Outer Limits in The Science Fiction Handbook, published by Doubleday (New York: 1979). The entry (p. 441 of this huge volume) was written by John Brosnan and Peter Nicholls.

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We'll not say from the sublime to the ridiculous, because TV rarely produces the sublime,

and series TV has never produced it; let us instead say from the workmanlike to the atrocious.

The Night Stalker.

Earlier on in this chapter I said that television was too homogenized to cough up anything

that was really charmingly awful; ABC-TV's The Night Stalker series is the exception

that

proves the rule.

It's not the movie that I'm talking about, remember. The film of *The Night Stalker*

was one of

the best movies ever made for TV. It was based on an abysmal horror novel, *The*

Kolchak

Tapes, by Jeff Rice-the novel was issued as a paperback after the unpublished

manuscript

landed on producer Dan Curtis's desk and became the basis of the film.

A short side trip here, if you don't mind too much. Dan Curtis became associated

with the

horror field as producer of what must have been the strangest soap opera ever to run

on the

tube; it was called *Dark Shadows*. *Shadows* became something of a nine-days' wonder

during

the last two years of its run. Originally conceived as a soft-focus ladies' gothic

of the type then

so popular in paperback (they have now been largely replaced by those sweet/savage

love

stories à la Rosemary Rogers, Katherine Woodiwiss, and Laurie McBain), it eventually

mutated-like Thriller-into something quite different from what had first been

intended. *Dark*

Shadows, under Curtis's inspired hand, became a kind of supernatural mad hatters'

tea party

(it even came on the air at the traditional hour for tea, four in the afternoon),

and hypnotized

viewers were treated to a seriocomic panorama of hell- a weirdly evocative combination of

Dante's ninth circle and Spike Jones. One member of the put-upon Collins family, Barnabas

Collins, was a vampire. He was played by Jonathan Frid, who became an overnight celebrity.

His celebrity, unfortunately, was every bit as lasting as Vaughan Meader's (and if you don't

remember Vaughan Meader, send me a stamped, self-addressed postcard and I will enlighten you).

One turned in to Dark Shadows every day, convinced that things could become no more lunatic . . . and yet somehow they did. At one point the entire cast of characters was

transported back into the seventeenth century for a six -week turn in fancy dress.

Barnabas had

a cousin who was a werewolf. Another cousin was a combination witch-succubus. Other soap

operas have always, of course, practiced their own bemusing forms of madness; my own favorite has always been the Kid Trick. The way the Kid Trick works is this: one of the

characters on a soap opera will have a baby in March. By July it will be two; in November it will

be six; the following February it will be lying in the hospital, comatose, after being hit by a car

while returning home from the sixth, grade; and by the March following its birth,
the child will be
eighteen and ready to begin really joining in the fun by getting the girl next door
pregnant, or

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turning suicidal, or possibly by announcing to his horrified parents that he's a
homosexual. The

Kid Trick is worthy of a Robert Sheckley alternate-world story, but at least the
characters on

most soap operas stay dead once their life-support machinery is turned off

(following which

there will be a four-month trial with the turner-offer in the dock for mercy

killings). The actors

and actresses who "died" picked up their final checks and went job hunting again.

Not so on

Dark Shadows. The dead simply came back as ghosts. It was better than the Kid Trick.

Dan Curtis went on to make two theatrical films based on the Dark Shadows plot and

using

its cast of undead characters-such a jump from TV to the movies is not unheard-of

(The Lone

Ranger is a case where it also happened), but it's rare, and the films, while not

great, were

certainly viewable. They were done with style, wit, and all those buckets of gore

Curtis couldn't

use on TV. They were also made with tremendous energy . . . a trait which helped to

make

The Night Stalker film the highest-rated made-for-TV movie ever telecast up until that time. (It

has since been surpassed in the ratings eight or nine times, and one of the films that has

outpointed it was the pilot film for-choke!-The Love Boat.)

Curtis himself is a remarkable, almost hypnotic man, friendly in a brusque, almost abrasive

way, apt to hog the credit for his enterprises, but in such an engaging way that nobody really

seems to mind. A throwback to an older and perhaps tougher breed of Hollywood filmmakers,

Curtis has never had any noticable problems in deciding where to plant his feet. If he likes you,

he stands up for you. If he doesn't, you're a "no-talent sonofabitch" (a phrase that has always

pleased me a great deal, and after reading this passage, Curtis may well call me up and use it

on me). He would be notable if for no other reason than he may be the only producer in

Hollywood effectively able to make a picture as frankly scary as The Night Stalker.

The film

was scripted by Richard Matheson, who has written for TV with better pace and more dramatic

flair than anyone since Reginald Rose, perhaps. Curtis went on to make another

picture with

Matheson and William F. Nolan which fans still talk about-Trilogy of Terror, with Karen Black.

The segment of this trio of stories most frequently mentioned was the final one, based

on Matheson's short story "Prey." In it, Ms. Black gives a tour-de-force solo performance as a

woman pursued by a tiny devil-doll with a spear. It is a bloody, gripping, scary fifteen minutes,

and it perhaps most clearly sums up what I'm trying to say about Dan Curtis: he has an

unerring, crude talent for finding the terror place inside you and squeezing it with a cold hand.

The Night Stalker dealt with a pragmatic reporter named Carl Kolchak who works the Las

Vegas beat. Played by Darren McGavin, his face somehow simultaneously tired, awed, cynical, and wiseacre beneath his battered straw fedora, Kolchak is a believable enough

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character, more Lew Archer than Clark Kent, dedicated above all else to making a buck in

Casino City.

He stumbles upon a string of murders that have apparently been committed by a vampire,

and follows a series of leads deeper and deeper into the supernatural, engaging at

the same

time in a war of words with the Powers That Be in Vegas. In the end he tracks the

vampire to

the old house which has become its abode and drives a stake through its heart. The

final twist

is predictable but nonetheless satisfying: Kolchak is discredited and fired, cut

loose from an

establishment that has no room for vampires in either its philosophy or its public

relations; he is

able to dispatch the bloodsucker (Barry Atwater), but the final victor is Las Vegas

boosterism.

McGavin, a talented actor, has rarely been as good-as believable-as he was in The

Night

Stalker movie.* It is his very pragmatism that enables us to believe in the vampire;

if a

hardnose like Carl Kolchak can believe it, the film suggests convincingly, then it

must be so.

The success of The Night Stalker did not go unnoticed at ABC, which was perennially

hit-hungry in those days before Mork, the Fonz, and all those other great characters

made their

way into the lineup. So a sequel, The Night Strangler, quickly followed. This time

the murders

were being committed by a doctor who had discovered the secret of eternal

life-always

provided he could slay five victims every five years or so to make up a new batch of

elixir. In

this one (set in Seattle), pathologists were covering up the fact that bits of

decayed human

flesh had been found on the necks of the strangulation victims-the doctor, you see,

always

began to get a little ripe as his five-year cycle neared its end.

*The part is really only a refinement of the part of David Ross, a private eye

McGavin played in a wonderful (if

short-lived) NBC series called The Outsider. Probably only the late David Janssen as

Harry Orwell and Brian

Keith as Lew Archer (in a series that only lasted three weeks-if you blinked, you

missed it) can compare with

McGavin's performance as a private eye.

Kolchak uncovered the cover-up and tracked the monster to its lair in Seattle's

so-called

"secret city," an underground section of old Seattle which Matheson visited on a

vacation trip in

1970.* And, needless to say, Kolchak managed to dispatch the zombie medico.

ABC decided it wanted to make a series out of Kolchak's continuing adventures, and

such a

series, predictably titled Kolchak: The Night Stalker, premiered on Friday,

September 13th,

1974. The series limped through one season, and it was an abysmal flop. There were

production problems from the beginning; Dan Curtis, who had been the guiding force

behind

the two successful TV-movies, had nothing to do with the series (no one I queried

seems to

really know why). Matheson, who had written the two original movies, never turned in

a single

script for the series. Paul Playden, the original producer, resigned his post before

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the series

began its run and was replaced by Cy Chermak. Most of the

*For much of the material on *The Night Stalker*, I am indebted to Berthe Roeger's

comprehensive analysis of

both the two movies and the series, published in *Fangoria* magazine (issue #3,

December 1979). The same issue

contains an invaluable episode-by-episode chronology of the series' run.

directors were forgettable; special effects were done on a shoestring. One of my

favorite

effects, which at least comes close to the fur-covered VW in *The Giant Spider*

Invasion, was

on view in an episode entitled "The Spanish Moss Murders." In this one, Richard

Kiel—who

would become famous as jaws in the last two James Bond pictures—cavorted through a

number of Chicago back alleys with a not-very-well-concealed zipper running up the

back of

his *Swamp Monster* suit.

But the basic problem with the *Night Stalker* series was the problem which dogs any

nonanthology series dealing with the supernatural or the occult: a complete

breakdown in the

ability to suspend disbelief. We could believe Kolchak once, as he tracked the vampire down in

Vegas; with some added effort we could even believe in him twice, tracking down the undead

doc in Seattle. Once the series got going, it was harder. Kolchak goes out to cover the last

cruise of a fine old luxury liner and discovers that one of his fellow passengers is a werewolf.

He sets out to cover an up-and-coming politician's campaign for the Senate and discovers the

candidate has sold his soul to the devil (and considering Watergate and Abscam, I hardly find

this supernatural or unusual). Kolchak also stumbles across a prehistoric reptile in Chicago's

sewer system ("The Sentry"); a succubus ("Legacy of Terror") ; a coven of witches ("The Trevi

Collection"); and in one of the most tasteless programs ever done for network TV, a headless

motorcyclist ("Chopper") . Eventually, suspension of disbelief becomes utterly impossibleeven,

one suspects, for the production staff, which began to play poor Kolchak more and more

for laughs. In a sense, what we saw in this series was a speeded-up version of the Universal

Syndrome: from horror to humor. But it took the Universal Pictures monsters some

eighteen

years to get from one state to the other; it only took *The Night Stalker* twenty episodes.

As Berthe Roeger points out, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* enjoyed a brief and quite successful revival when the series was rerun as part of CBS's late-night program of oldies.

Roeger's conclusion, however, that its success was due to any merit in the series itself seems

off the mark to me. If the tune-in was large, I suspect it was for the same reason that the

theater always fills up at midnight for *Reefer Madness*. I've mentioned the siren song of crap

before, and here it is again. I suspect that people tuned in once, couldn't believe how bad this

thing was, and kept tuning in on successive nights to make sure that their eyes had not

deceived them.

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They hadn't; perhaps only *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, the launching pad for that

apostle of disaster, Irwin Allen, can compete with *Kolchak* for total collapse. Yet we should

remember that not even Seabury Quinn, with his *Jules de Grandin* series in *Weird Tales*, was

able to keep the continuing-character format rolling very successfully, and Quinn was one of the most talented writers of the pulp era. Kolchak: The Night Stalker (which became known during its run to some pundits as Kolchak's Monster of the Week) nonetheless holds a certain warm spot in my heart-a small warm spot, it is true-and in the hearts of a great many fans.

There is something childlike and unsophisticated in its very awfulness.

5

"There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. It is the dimension of the imagination. It is an area we call . . . The Twilight Zone."

With this rather purple invocation-which did not sound purple at all in Rod Serling's measured and almost matter-of-fact delivery-viewers were invited to enter a queerly boundless other world . . . and enter they did. The Twilight Zone ran on CBS from October of 1959 through the summer of 1965-from the torpor of the Eisenhower administration to LBJ's escalation of American involvement in Vietnam, the first of the long hot summers in American

cities, and the advent of the Beatles.

Of all the dramatic programs which have ever run on American TV, it is the one which comes closest to defying any overall analysis. It was not a western or a cop show (although

some of the stories had western formats or featured cops 'n' robbers); it was not really a

science fiction show (although The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows categorizes it as such); not a sitcom (although some of the episodes were funny) ; not really

occult (although it did occult stories frequently-in its own peculiar fashion), not really

supernatural. It was its own thing, and in a large part that fact alone seems to account for the

fact that a whole generation is able to associate the Serling program with the budding of the

sixties . . . at least, as the sixties are remembered.

Rod Serling, the program's creator, came to prominence in what has been referred to as

television's "golden age"-although those who have termed it so because they remember fondly such anthology programs as Studio One, Playhouse 90, and Climax have somehow managed to forget such chestnuts as Mr. Arsenic, Hands of Mystery, Doorway to Danger, and Doodle Weaver-programs which ran during the same period, and which by comparison make such current TV programs as Vega\$ and That's Incredible! look like great

American theater. Television never really has had a golden age; only successive

seasons of

sounding brass which vary slightly as to the trueness of the tone.

Nevertheless, television has produced isolated spasms of quality, and three of

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Serling's

early teleplays-*Patterns*, *The Comedian*, and *Requiem for a Heavyweight*-form a large

part

of what television viewers mean when they speak of a "golden age" . . . although

Serling was

by no means alone. There were others, including Paddy Chayefsky (*Marty*) and Reginald

Rose

(*Twelve Angry Men*) who contributed to that illusion of gold.

Serling was the son of a Binghamton, New York, butcher, a Golden Gloves champ (at

approximately five feet four, Serling's class was flyweight), and a paratrooper

during World

War II. He began to write (unsuccessfully) in college and went on to write

(unsuccessfully) for a

radio station in Cincinnati. "That experience proved frustrating," Ed Naha relates

in his fond

reprise of Serling's career. "His introspective characters came under attack by . .

. executives

who wanted their 'people to get their teeth into the soil'! Serling recalled the

period years later:

'What those guys wanted wasn't a writer, but a plow.' " *

Serling quit radio and began to freelance. His first success came in 1955 (*Patterns*,

starring

Van Heflin and Everett Sloane, the story of a dirty corporate power play and the

resulting moral

squeeze on one executive-the teleplay won Serling his first Emmy), and he never

looked

back . . . but he somehow never really moved on, either. He wrote a number of

feature films-

Assault on a Queen was maybe the worst of them; Planet of the Apes and Seven Day in

May

were two of the good ones-but television was his home, and Serling never really

outgrew it,

as did Chayefsky (Hospital, Network). Television was his home, where he lived most

comfortably, and after a five-year hiatus following the cancellation of The Twilight

Zone, he

turned up on the tube again, this time as the host of Night Gallery. Serling himself

expressed

feelings of doubt and depression about his deep involvement in this mediocre medium.

"But

God knows," he said in his last interview, "when I look back over thirty years of

professional

writing, I'm hard-pressed to come up with anything that's important. Some things are

literate,

some things are interesting, some things are classy, but very damn little is

important." **

Serling apparently saw The Twilight Zone as a way of going underground and keeping

his

ideals alive in television following the cancellation of the prestige drama programs

in the late

fifties and early sixties. And to an extent, I suppose he succeeded. Under the

comforting guise

of "it's only make-believe," The Twilight Zone was able to deal with questions of

fascism ("He

Lives," starring Dennis Hopper as a young neo-Nazi guided by the shadowy figure of

Adolf

Hitler), ugly mass hysteria ("The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street"), and even

Joseph

Conrad's heart of darkness-rarely has any television program dared to present human

nature

in such an ugly, revealing light as that used in "The Shelter," in which a number of

suburban

neighbors along Your Street, U.S.A., are reduced to animals squabbling over a

fallout shelter

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during a nuclear crisis.

*For this and much of the material on Serling and The Twilight Zone, I'm indebted to

"Rod Serling's Dream," by

Ed Naha, published in Starlog #15 (August 1978), and to Gary Gerani, who compiled

the complete episode guide

in the same issue.

**Quoted in an interview conducted by Linda Brevelle shortly before Serling's death

and published under the

title, "Rod Serling's Last Interview" (a rather ghoulish title, I think, but then,

what do I know?), in the 1976 Writer'

Yearbook.

Other episodes generated a kind of existential weirdness that no other series has

been able

to match. There was, for instance, "Time Enough at Last," starring Burgess Meredith*

as a

myopic bank clerk who can never find time enough to read. He survives an H-bomb

attack, in

fact, because he is reading in the vault when the bombs fall. Meredith is delighted

with the

holocaust; he finally has all the time to read that a man could want. Unfortunately,

he breaks

his glasses shortly after reaching the library. One of the guiding moral precepts of

The Twilight

Zone seems to have been that a little irony is good for your blood.

If The Twilight Zone had bowed on TV as we have found it in the period 1976-1980, it

would

have undoubtedly disappeared after an initial run of six to nine episodes. Its

ratings were low

to begin with . . . like in the cellar. It was up against a fairly popular Robert

Taylor cops 'n'

robbers meller, The Detectives, on ABC, and the immensely popular Gillette Cavalcade

of

Sports on NBC-this was the show that invited you to put your feet up and watch such fighters

as Carmen Basilio and Sugar Ray Robinson get their faces changed.

But television moved more slowly in those days, and scheduling was less anarchistic.

The

Twilight Zone's first season consisted of thirty-six half-hour episodes, and by the season's

midpoint the ratings had begun to pick up, helped by good word-of-mouth and glowing reviews.

The reviews played their part by helping CBS decide that they had that potentially valuable

commodity, a "prestige program." ** Nevertheless, problems continued. The program had

problems finding a steady sponsor (this was back in the days, you must remember, when

dinosaurs walked the earth and TV time was cheap enough to allow a single sponsor to pay for

an entire program-hence GE Theater, Alcoa Playhouse, The Voice of Firestone, The Lux Show, Coke Time, and a host of others; to this writer's knowledge, the last program to be

wholly sponsored by one company was Bonanza, sponsored by GM), and CBS

*Meredith became perhaps the most familiar face of all to Twilight Zone fans, save for Serling's own. Probably

his best-remembered role came in "Printer's Devil," where he plays a newspaper owner who is really Satan . . .

complete with a jutting, crooked cigar that was somehow diabolical.

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**In 1972 CBS discovered another "prestige program"-The Waltons, created by Earl

Hamner, Jr., who wrote a

good many Twilight Zones . . . including, coincidentally, "The Bewitchin' Pool," the

last original Twilight Zone

episode to be telecast on the network. Placed against brutal competition-NBC's The

Flip Wilson Show and ABC's

own version of The Church of What's Happening Now, The Mod Squad-CBS stuck with

Hamner's creation in spite

of the low ratings because of the prestige factor. The Waltons went on to outlive

its competition and at this writing

has run seven seasons.

began to wake up to the fact that Sterling had put none of his cudgels away but was

now

wielding them in the name of fantasy.

During that first season, The Twilight Zone presented "Perchance to Dream," the late

Charles Beaumont's first contribution to the series, and "Third from the Sun," by

Richard

Matheson. The gimmick of the latter-that the group of protagonists is fleeing not

from Earth

but to it-is one that has been utterly beaten to death by now (most notably by that

deep-space turkey Battlestar Galactica), but most viewers can remember the snap of

that

ending to this day. It was the episode which marks the point at which many

occasional

tuners-in became addicts. Here, for once, was something Completely New and Different.

During its third season, The Twilight Zone was either canceled (Serling's version) or

squeezed out by insoluble scheduling problems (the CBS version). In either case, it returned

the following year as an hourlong program. In his article "Rod Serling's Dream," Ed Naha says:

"The 'something different' the elongated (Twilight Zone) came up with turned out to be

boredom. After thirteen publicly shunned episodes, the 60-minute Twilight Zone was canceled."

It was indeed canceled-only to return for a final, mostly dull, season as a half-hour show

again-but because of boredom? In my own view, the hour-long episodes of The Twilight Zone

included some of the best of the entire run. There was "The Thirty-Fathom Grave," in which the

crew of a Navy destroyer hears ghosts tapping inside a sunken submarine; "Printer's Devil";

"The New Exhibit" (one of The Twilight Zone's few excursions into outright horror, this dealt

with a wax museum janitor played by Martin Balsam who discovers that the Murderers' Row

exhibit has come to life); and "Miniature," which starred Robert Duvall in a Charles

Beaumont

script about a man who escapes back into the gay nineties. ,

As Naha points out, by its final season "no one at CBS really cared about the series." He

goes on to say that ABC, which had had some success with *The Outer Limits*, extended feelers to Serling about doing a sixth season with them. Serling refused. "I think ABC wanted

to make a trip to the graveyard every week," he said.

For Serling, life was never quite the same. The angry young man who had written *Patterns*

began doing television commercials-that unmistakable voice could be heard huckstering tires

and cold remedies in a bizarre turn that recalls the broken fighter in *Requiem for a Heavyweight* who ends up performing in fixed wrestling matches. And in 1970 he began
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making that "trip to the graveyard every week," not on ABC but on NBC, as host and sometime

writer of *Night Gallery*. The series was inevitably compared to *The Twilight Zone* in spite of the

fact that *Gallery* was really a watered-down Thriller with Serling doing the Boris Karloff hosting job.

Serling had none of the creative control he had enjoyed while doing *The Twilight Zone*. (He

complained at one point that the studio was trying to turn Night Gallery "into Mannix with a shroud.") Nonetheless, Night Gallery produced a number of interesting episodes, including adaptations of H. P. Lovecraft's "Cool Air" and "Pickman's Model." It also presented an episode which must rate as one of the most frightening ever telecast on TV. "Boomerang," based on a story by Oscar Cook, dealt with a little bug called an earwig. The earwig is placed in the villain's ear and began to-ulp!-chew its way through his brain, leaving the man in an excruciating, sweaty state of agony (the physiological reason for this, since the brain has no nerves, is never explained). He is told there's only one chance in a billion that the pesky little beast will actually chew on a straight course across to his other ear and thus find the exit; much more likely is the possibility that it will just continue chewing its way around in there until the fellow goes mad . . . or commits suicide. The viewer is immensely relieved when the nearimpossible happens and the earwig actually does come out the other side . . . and then, the kicker comes: the earwig was female. And it laid eggs in there. Millions of them.

Most Night Gallery episodes were nowhere near as chilling, and the series was canceled

after limping along in one form or another for three labored years. It was Serling's last star turn.

"On his fortieth birthday," Naha says, "Serling made his first parachute jump since World

War II." Serling's reason? "I did it," he said, "to prove that I wasn't old." But he looked old; a

comparison of his early Twilight Zone publicity photos and those taken on the Night Gallery set

before those mostly idiotic paintings shows a change which is nearly shocking.

Serling's face

had become lined, his neck wattled; it is the face of a man who has been partially dissolved in

television's vitriol. In 1972 he received an interviewer in his study, which was lined with framed

reviews of Requiem, Patterns, and other teleplays from the early days.

"Sometimes I come in here just to look," he said. "I haven't had reviews like that in years.

Now I know why people keep scrapbooks-just to prove to themselves it really happened."

The man who jumped from a plane on his fortieth birthday to prove to himself that he wasn't

old refers to himself constantly as old in the Linda Brevette interview some nine years later;

she characterizes him as "vibrant and alive" during their meeting at La Taverna,

Serling's

favorite L.A. watering hole, but again and again those disquieting phrases crop up;

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at one point

he says, "I'm not an old man yet, but I'm not a young man, either"; at another he

says he is an

old man. Why didn't he get out of the creative demo derby? At the end of Requiem for

a

Heavyweight, Jack Palance says he must go back into the ring-even though the whole

thing

is fixed-because the ring is all he knows. It's as good an answer as any.

Serling, a fierce workaholic who sometimes smoked four packs of cigarettes a day,

suffered

a crippling heart attack in 1975 and died following open-heart surgery. His legacy

consisted of

a few fine early plays and The Twilight Zone, a series which has become one of those

peculiar

TV legends, like The Fugitive and Wanted: Dead or Alive. What are we to make of this

program which is so revered (by people who were mostly children when they originally

viewed

it) ? "I guess a third of the shows were pretty damned good," Serling told an

interviewer.

"Another third would have been passable. Another third are dogs."

The fact is that Serling himself wrote sixty-two of the first ninety-two Twilight

Zones typing

them, dictating them to a secretary, talking them into a dictaphone-and, of course, smoking

nonstop. Fantasy fans will recognize the names of almost all the other writers, those who

contributed the other thirty episodes: Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson, George Clayton

Johnson, Earl Hamner, Jr., Robert Presnell, E. Jack Neuman, Montgomery Pittman, and Ray

Bradbury.* The simple fact is that most of the bow-wows which escaped the kennel had Serling's name on them. They include "Mr. Denton on Doomsday," "The SixteenMillimeter

Shrine," "Judgment Night," "The Big Tall Wish" (a shameless tear-jerker about a kid who helps

a broken-down pug win his last match), and too many others for me to want to mention.

Even the recollection most people seem to have of The Twilight Zone has always bothered

me; it is the concluding "twists" that most people seem to remember, but the show's actual

success seemed to be based on more solid concepts, concepts which form a vital link between

the old pulp fiction predating the fifties (or those Thriller programs which used the pulps as the

basis of their best stories) and the "new" literature of horror and fantasy. Week

after week, The

Twilight Zone presented ordinary people in extraordinary situations, people who had somehow

turned sideways and slipped through a crack in reality . . . and thus

*Bradbury adapted his own short story, "I Sing the Body Electric," for the program.

It is, to the best of my

knowledge, Bradbury's only screen credit following an odd but rather magnificent adaptation of Melville's Moby

Dick for the John Huston film.

into Serling's "zone." It is a powerful concept, and surely the clearest road into the land of

fantasy for viewers and readers who do not ordinarily care to visit that land. But

the concept

was by no means original with Serling; Ray Bradbury had begun putting the ordinary and the

horrible cheek-by-jowl in the forties, and when he began to move on into more arcane

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lands

and to use the language in more and more novel ways, Jack Finney came upon the scene and

began refining the same extraordinary-in-the-ordinary themes. In a benchmark collection of

short stories called The Third Level, the literary equivalent of those startling

Magritte paintings

where railroad trains are roaring out of fireplaces or those Dali paintings where

clocks are lying

limply over the branches of trees, Finney actually defined the boundaries of

Serling's Twilight

Zone. In the lead story, Finney tells of a man who finds a mythical third level to

Grand Central

Station (which only has two concourse levels, for those of you who aren't familiar

with that neat

old building). The third level is a kind of way station in time, giving egress on a

happier, simpler

time (those same late 1800's which so many put-upon Twilight Zone heroes escaped

into, and

essentially the same period Finney himself returns to in his celebrated novel, *Time*

and *Again*).

In many ways, Finney's third level satisfies all the definitions of Serling's

Twilight Zone, and in

many ways it was Finney's concept that made Serling's concept possible. One of

Finney's

great abilities as a writer has been his talent for allowing his stories to slip

unobtrusively,

almost casually, across the line and into another world . . . as when a character,

picking

through his change, happens upon a dime which bears not the likeness of FDR but of

Woodrow Wilson, or when another Finney character begins on a journey to the idyllic

planet

Verna as a passenger aboard a rickety old charter bus that is eventually parked in a

tumbledown country barn ("Of Missing Persons"). Finney's most important accomplishment, which the best episodes of The Twilight Zone echo (and which the best of the post-Zone writers of fantasy have also echoed), is that Daliesque ability to create the fantasy . . . and then not apologize for it or explain it. It simply hangs there, fascinating and a little sickening, a mirage too real to dismiss: a brick floating over a refrigerator, a man eating a TV dinner full of eyeballs, kids on a toylittered floor playing with their pet dinosaur. If the fantasy seems real enough, Finney insisted, and Serling after him, we don't need any wires or mirrors. It was, in a large part, Finney and Serling who finally answered H. P. Lovecraft, who showed a new direction. For me and those of my generation, the answer was like a thunderclap of revelation, opening a million entrancing possibilities. And yet Finney, who perhaps understood Serling's concept of "that middle ground between light and shadow" better than anyone else, was never represented on The Twilight Zone-not as a scriptwriter, not as a source. Serling later adapted Assault on a Queen (1966), a work which can most humanely be characterized as unfortunate. It contains all the

preachy,

talking-heads stuff that brought so many of his Twilight Zone scripts low. It's one

of the minor

tragedies of the field that what might have been an inspired meeting of two like

minds should

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have turned out so poorly. But if you feel disappointed with my analysis of The

Twilight Zone

(and some, I suspect, may feel that I have spat on an icon), I urge you to find a

copy of

Finney's The Third Level, which will show you what The Twilight Zone could have

been.

And still, the program left us with a number of powerful memories, and Serling's

analysis

that a third of the shows were pretty damn good may not have been far from the mark.

Anyone

who watched the show regularly can remember William Shatner, held in thrall by a

penny

fortune-telling machine in a cheesy restaurant located in a one-stoplight town

("Nick of Time");

Everett Sloane succumbing to gambling mania in "The Fever," and the hoarse, metallic

cry of

the coins ("Fraa-aaanklin!") calling him back to do battle with the diabolical

slot-machine; the

beautiful woman who is reviled for her ugliness in a world of piglike humanoids

(Donna

Douglas of *The Beverly Hillbillies* in "Eye of the Beholder"). And, of course, those

two classics

by Richard Matheson, "The Invaders" (starring a grimly brilliant Agnes Moorhead as a

country

woman fighting off tiny invaders from space, a story which foreshadows Matheson's

later

treatment of a similar subject in "Prey") and "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," in which

William

Shatner plays a newly recovered mental patient who sees an evil-looking gremlin

pulling at the

housing of an airliner's motor.

The *Twilight Zone* also showcased a wide range of performers (Ed Wynn, Kennan Wynn,

Buster Keaton, Jack Klugman, Franchot Tone, Art Carney, Pippa Scott, Robert Redford,

and

Cloris Leachman among others), writers, and directors (Buzz Kulik, Stuart Rosenberg,

and Ted

Post, to name a few). It frequently featured startling and exciting music by the

late Bernard

Herrmann; the best special effects were done by William Tuttle, probably only second

to Dick

Smith (or the new makeup genius, Tom Savini) in wizardry.

It was a pretty good show, the way the most fondly remembered TV series are pretty

good

shows . . . but ultimately, no better. TV is the endless gobbler of talent,

something new and

poisonous under the sun, and if *Zone* is ultimately weaker than our fond memories of

it would

like to allow, the fault lies not with Serling but with TV itself-the hungry maw,

the bottomless

pit of shit. Serling wrote a total of eighty-four episodes, something like 2,200

pages of script

according to the screenwriter's rule of thumb that one page of script equals one

minute of

video. This is a staggering pile of work, and it really isn't surprising that the

all-too-occasional

clunker like "I Am the Night-Color Me Black" got through. Rod Serling was only able

to do so

much in the name of Kimberly-Clark and Chesterfield Kings. Then television ate him

up.

6

And as far as TV is concerned, I guess it's time for everybody to get out of the

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pool. I don't

have enough John Simon in me to really enjoy shooting TV's creative cripples as they

crawl

and squirm around in the great TV Cancellation Corral. I've even tried to treat

Kolchak: The

Night Stalker with affection, because I certainly feel a degree of affection for it.

Bad as it was, it
wasn't any worse than some of the Saturday matinee creature-features that enlivened
my life
as a kid-The Black Scorpion or The Beast of Hollow Mountain, for instance.
Individual TV programs have produced brilliant or near-brilliant excursions into the
supernatural-Alfred Hitchcock Presents, for instance, gave us adaptations of several
Ray
Bradbury stories (the best of them was probably "The Jar"), one terrifying William
Hope
Hodgson story, "The Thing in the Weeds," a nonsupernatural bone-freezer from the pen
of
John D. MacDonald ("The Morning After"), and fans of the bizarre will remember the
episode
where the cops ate the murder weapon-a leg of lamb . . . that one based on a story
by
Roald Dahl.
There was "They're Coming," the original hour-long pilot for The Twilight Zone, and
the short
French film "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," which appeared on American
television for
the first time as a Twilight Zone episode (this adaptation of the Bierce story
cannot be seen
during syndication runs of The Twilight Zone). Another Bierce story, "One of the
Missing," ran
on PBS in the winter of 1979. And speaking of PBS, there was also an interesting
adaptation

of Dracula done there. Originally telecast in 1977, it featured Louis Jourdan as the legendary Count. This videotaped drama is both moody and romantic; Jourdan gives a more effective performance than Frank Langella in the John Badham film, and the scenes of Dracula crawling down the wall of his castle are marvelous. The Jourdan version also comes closer to the heart of the vampire's sexuality, presenting to us in Lucy, the three weird sisters, and in Dracula himself creatures who possess a loveless sexuality-one which kills. It is more powerful than the hohum romance of the Badham version, in spite of Langella's energetic job in the title role.

Jack Palance has also played Dracula on television (in another Matheson screenplay and another Dan Curtis production) and did quite well by the Count . . . although I prefer Jourdan's performance.

Other one-shot TV movies and specials run from the merely forgettable (NBC's ill-advised adaptation of Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home*, for instance) to some really hideous pieces of work: Cornel Wilde in *Gargoyles* (Bernie Casey plays the head gargoyle as a kind of fivethousand-year-old Ayatollah Khomeini) and Michael Sarrazin is the mistitled-and

misbegotten-Frankenstein: The True Story. The risk rate is so high that when my own novel

'Salem's Lot was adapted for television after Warners had tried fruitlessly to get it off the

ground as a theatrical film for three years, my feeling at its generally favorable reception was

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mostly relief. For awhile it seemed that NBC might turn it into a weekly series, and when that

rather numbing prospect passed by the boards, I felt relief again.

Most television series have ranged from the ludicrous (Land of the Giants) to the utterly

inane (The Munsters, Struck by Lightning). The anthology series of the last ten years have

meant well, by and large, but have been emasculated by pressure groups both without and

within; they have been sacrificed on the altar of television's apparent belief that both drama

and melodrama are best appreciated while in a semidoze. There was Journey to the Unknown,

a British import (from the Hammer studios). Some of the stories were engrossing, but ABC

made it clear rather quickly that it had no real interest in frightening anyone, and the series

died quickly. Tales of the Unexpected, produced by Quinn Martin (The FBI, The

Fugitive, The

Invaders, The New Breed, and God knows how many others), was more interesting, concentrating on psychological horrors (in one episode, reminiscent of Anne Rivers Siddons's

The House Next Door, a murderer sees his victim rise from the dead on his television set), but

low ratings killed the program after a short run . . . a fate that might have been

The Twilight

Zone's, had not the network stuck by it.

In fine, the history of horror and fantasy on television is a short and tacky one.

Let's turn the

magic eye off and turn to the bookshelf; I want us to talk about some stories where all the

artificial boundaries are removed-both those of visual set and of network restriction-and the

author is free to "get you" in any way he can. An uneasy concept, and some of these books

scared the hell out of me even as they were delighting me. Maybe you've had the same experience . . . or maybe you will.

Just take my arm and step this way.

CHAPTER IX

Horror Fiction

IT MIGHT NOT BE IMPOSSIBLE to present an overview of American horror and fantasy fiction

during the last thirty years, but it wouldn't be just a chapter in this book; it

would be a book in

itself, and probably a dull one (maybe even a text, that apotheosis of the Dull Book species).

For our purposes, I can't imagine why we would want to deal with all the books published in

the genre anyway; most of them are just downright bad, and as with TV, I have no taste for the

job of beating the field's most spectacular violators with their shortcomings. If you want to read

John Saul and Frank de Felitta, go right ahead. It's your threefifty. But I'm not going to discuss them here.

My plan is to discuss ten books that seem representative of everything in the genre that is

fine: the horror story as both literature and entertainment, a living part of twentieth-century

literature, and worthy successors to such books as Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,

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Dracula, and Chalmers's The King in Yellow. They are books and stories which seem to me to

fulfill the primary duty of literature-to tell us the truth about ourselves by telling us lies about

people who never existed.

Some of the books discussed here have been "best sellers"; some have been written by

members of the so-called "fantasy community"; some have been written by people with no interest in fantasy or the supernatural for its own sake, but who have seen it as a particularly useful tool to be used once and then perhaps put aside forever (although many have also found that the use of this tool is apt to become habit-forming). Most of them-even those which cannot be neatly pigeonholed as "best sellers"-have been steady sellers across the years, probably because the horror tale, which is regarded by most serious critics in about the same light that Dr. Johnson regarded women preachers and dancing dogs, manages to consistently satisfy as entertainment even when it's only good. When it's great, it can deliver a megaton wallop (as it does in *Lord of the Flies*) that other forms of literature can rarely equal. Story has always been the abiding virtue of the horror tale, from "The Monkey's Paw" to T. E. D. Klein's utterly flabbergasting novella of monsters (from Costa Rica, yet!) under the streets of New York, "Children of the Kingdom." That being so, one only wishes that those great writers among us who have also succeeded in becoming our greatest bores in recent years

would

attempt something in the genre and stop poking around in their navels for intellectual fluff.

I hope that by discussing these ten books, I can dilate upon those virtues of story and

entertainment and perhaps even indicate some of the themes which seems to run through

most good horror stories. I should be able to do this if I'm doing my job, because there just

aren't that many thematic trails to go down. For all of their mythic hold over us, the field of the

supernatural is a narrow one in the greater spread of general literature. We can depend on the

reappearance of the Vampire, and our furry friend (who sometimes wears its fur on the inside)

the Werewolf, and the Thing Without a Name. But the time has also come to bring on that

fourth archetype: the Ghost.

We may also find ourselves returning to the tension between Apollonian and Dionysian,

since this tension exists in all horror fiction, the bad as well as the good, leading back to that

endlessly fascinating question of who's okay and who isn't. That's really the taproot, isn't it?

And we may also find that narcissism is the major difference between the old horror fiction and

the new; that the monsters are no longer just due on Maple Street, but may pop up in our own mirrors-at any time.

2

Probably Ghost Story by Peter Straub is the best of the supernatural novels to be

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published

in the wake of the three books that kicked off a new horror "wave" in the

seventies-those

three, of course, being Rosemary's Baby, The Exorcist, and The Other. The fact that these

three books, all published within five years of each other, enjoyed such wide popularity, helped

to convince (or reconvince) publishers that horror fiction had a commercial potential much

wider than the readership of such defunct magazines as Weird Tales and Unknown or the

paperback reissues of Arkham House books.*

*A word about Arkham House. There is probably no dedicated fantasy fan in America who doesn't have at least

one of those distinctive black-bound volumes upon his or her shelf . . . and probably in a high place of honor.

August Derleth, the founder of this small Wisconsin-based publishing house, was a rather uninspired novelist of

the Sinclair Lewis school and an editor of pure genius: Arkham was first to publish H. P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, Ramsey Campbell, and Robert Bloch in book form . . . and these are only a few of Derleth's legion. He published his books in limited editions ranging from five hundred to twenty-five hundred copies, and some of them- Lovecraft's *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* and Bradbury's *Dark Carnival*, for instance-are now highly soughtafter collectors' items.

The resulting scrambling to get the next "big" shiver-and-shake novel produced some really terrible books. As a further result, the wave had begun to withdraw by the mid-seventies, and more traditional best-sellers began to reappear: stories of sex, big business, sex, spies, gay sex, doctors in trouble, kinky sex, historical romances, sexy celebrities, war stories, and sex.

That isn't to say that publishers stopped looking for occult/horror novels or stopped publishing them; the mills of the publishing world grind slowly but exceedingly fine (which is one reason that such an amazing river of gruel streams forth every spring and fall from the larger New York publishing houses), and the so-called "mainstream horror novel" will probably be with us yet awhile. But that first heady rush is over, and editors in New York no longer

automatically

scramble for the Standard Contract Form and fill in a meaty advance as soon as

something in

the story comes out of the woodwork Aspiring writers please take note.

Against this background, Coward, McCann and Geoghegan published Peter Straub's Julia

in 1975. It was not his first novel; he had published a novel called Marriages-a

nonsupernatural "this-is-the-way-we-live-now" sort of story-two years previous.

Although

Straub is an American, he and his wife lived in England and Ireland for ten years,

and in both

execution and intent, Julia is an English ghost story. The setting is English, most

of the

characters are English, and most importantly, the novel's diction is English-cool,

rational,

almost disconnected from any kind of emotional base. There is no sense of the Grand

Guignol

in the book, although the book's most vital situation certainly suggests it: Kate,

the daughter of

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Julia and Magnus, has choked on a piece of meat and Julia kills her daughter while

trying to

perform a tracheotomy with a kitchen knife. The girl, it would appear, then returns

as a

malevolent spirit.

We aren't given the tracheotomy in any detail-the blood splashing the walls and the mother's hand, the terror and the cries. This is the past; we see it in reflected light. Much later,

Julia sees the girl who may or may not be Kate's ghost burying something in the sand. When

the girl leaves, Julia digs up the hole, discovering first a knife and then the mutilated corpse of

a turtle. This reflection back upon the botched tracheotomy is elegant, but it has little heat.

Two years later Straub published a second supernatural novel, *If You Could See Me Now*.

Like *Julia*, *If You Could See Me Now* is a novel occupied with the idea of the revenant, that

vengeful spirit from an undead past. All of Straub's supernatural novels work effectively when

dealing with these old ghosts; they are stories of the past continuing to work on the present in

a malevolent way. It has been suggested that Ross McDonald is writing gothics rather than

private eye novels; it could be said that Peter Straub is writing gothics rather than horror

novels. What distinguishes his work in *Julia*, *If You Could See Me Now*, and, most splendidly,

in *Ghost Story* is his refusal to view the gothic conventions as static ones. All three of these

books have much in common with the classic gothics of the genre-*The Castle of*

Otranto, The

Monk, Melmoth the Wanderer, even Frankenstein (although in terms of its telling,

Frankenstein

is actually less a gothic and more a modern novel than Ghost Story)-they are all

books where

the past eventually becomes more important than the present.

This would seem a valid enough course for the novel to follow to any people who see

uses

in the study of history, you would think, but the gothic novel has always been

considered

something of a curiosity, a widget on the great machine of English-speaking fiction.

Straub's

first two novels seem to me to be mostly unconscious attempts to do something with

this

widget; what distinguishes Ghost Story and makes it such a success is that with this

book,

Straub seems to have grasped exactly-consciously-what the gothic romance is about,

and

how it relates to the rest of literature. Put another way, he has discovered what

the widget was

supposed to do, and Ghost Story is a vastly entertaining manual of operation.

"[Ghost Story] started as a result of my having just read all the American

supernatural fiction

I could find," Straub says. "I reread Hawthorne and James, and went out and got all

of

Lovecraft and a lot of books by his 'set'-this was because I wanted to find out what my

tradition was, since I was by then pretty firmly in the field-I also read Bierce, Edith Wharton's

ghost stories, and a lot of Europeans The first thing I thought of was having a bunch of old

men tell stories to each other-and then I hoped I could think of some device that

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would link all

the stories. I very much like the idea of stories set down in novels-a lot of my life seems to

have been spent listening to older people tell me stories about their families, their youth, all the

rest. And it seemed like a formal challenge. After that I thought of cannibalizing certain old

classic stories, and plugging them into the Chowder Society. This idea excited me.

It seemed

very audacious, and I thought that was very good. So I went ahead, after I got to that point in

the book, and wrote junked-up versions of "My Kinsman, Major Molyneux," The Turn of the

Screw, and started on "The Fall of the House of Usher." But by then the lead-in threatened to

become the whole book. So I dropped the Poe story (the Hawthorne story came out when I

edited the first draft). I was thinking at the time that the Chowder Society would follow these

with their own stories-Lewis's monologue about the death of his wife, Sears and Ricky

splitting a monologue (trading fours, in a way) about the death of Eva Galli."

The first striking thing about Ghost Story is its resemblance to Julia. That book begins with a

woman who has lost a child; Ghost Story begins with a man who has found one. But these two

children are eerily similar, and there is an atmosphere of evil about both of them.

From Julia:

Almost immediately, she saw the blonde girl again. The child was sitting on the ground at

some distance from a group of other children, boys and girls who were carefully watching

her The blonde girl was working intently at something with her hands, wholly concentrated on it. Her face was sweetly serious This was what gave the scene the

aspect of a performance The girl was seated, her legs straight out before her, in the

sandy overspill from one of the sandboxes She was speaking softly now to her audience, ranged on the scrubby grass before her in groups of three and four

They

were certainly unnaturally quiet, completely taken up by the girl's theatrics.

Is it this little girl, who is holding her audience spellbound by cutting up a

turtle before their

eyes, the same little girl who accompanies Don Wanderley on his strange trip south
from

Milburn, New York, to Panama City, Florida? This is the little girl as Don first
sees her. You
decide.

And that was how he found her. At first, he was doubtful, watching the girl who had
appeared in the playground one afternoon. She was not beautiful, not even
attractive-she

was dark and intense, and her clothes never seemed to be clean. The other children
avoided her . . . perhaps children were quicker at seeing real differences than
adults

Don had only one real clue that she was not the ordinary child she appeared to be,
and he
clung to it with a fanatic's desperation. The first time he had seen her, he had
gone cold.

Julia, in the book of the same name, speaks to a small black child about the unnamed

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girl

who has mutilated the turtle. The black girl wanders over to Julia and begins the
conversation

by asking:

"What's your name?"

"Julia."

The girl's mouth opened a fraction wider.

"Doolya?"

Julia raised her hand for a moment to the child's springy ruff of hair. "What's your name?"

"Mona."

"Do you know the girl who was just playing in here? The girl with the blonde hair who

was sitting and talking?"

Mona nodded. "Do you know her name?"

Mona nodded again. "Doolya."

"Julia?"

"Mona. Take me with you."

"Mona, what was that girl doing? Was she telling a story?"

"She does. Things." The girl blinked.

In Ghost Story, Don Wanderley similarly speaks with another child about the child who so

disturbs him:

"What's the name of that girl?" He asked, pointing.

The boy shuffled his feet, blinked and said "Angie."

"Angie what?"

"Don't know."

"Why doesn't anybody ever play with her?"

The boy squinted at him, cocking his head; then, deciding he could be trusted, leaned

forward charmingly, cupped his hands beside his mouth to tell a dark secret.

"Because

she's awful."

Another theme which runs through both novels-a very Henry Jamesian theme-is the idea that ghosts, in the end, adopt the motivations and perhaps the very souls of those who behold

them. If they are malevolent, their malevolence comes from us. Even in their terror, Straub's

characters recognize the kinship. In their appearance, his ghosts, like the ghosts James,

Wharton, and M. R. James conjure up, are Freudian. Only in their final exorcism do Straub's

ghosts become truly inhuman-emissaries from the world of "outside evil." When Julia asks

Mona the name of the turtle-killing little girl, Mona gives back her own name ("Doolya," she

says). And when, in *Ghost Story*, Don Wanderley tries to ascertain who this eerie little girl is,

this disquieting exchange follows:

"Okay, let's try again," he said. "What are you?"

For the first time since he had taken her into the car, she really smiled. It was a transformation, but not of a kind to make him feel easier; she did not look any less adult.

"You know," she said.

He insisted. "What are you?"

She smiled all through her amazing response. "I am you."

"No. I am me. You are you."

"I am you."

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Ghost Story is at first glance an extravagant mishmash of every horror and gothic convention ever yarned in all those B-pictures we've just finished talking about.

There are

animal mutilations. There's demon possession (Gregory Bate, a secondary villain,

battens

upon his younger sister, who escapes, and his younger brother . . . who doesn't).

There's

vampirism, ghoulishness (in the literal sense of that word; Gregory dines on his

victims after

they're dead), and werewolvbery of a most singular and frightening sort. Yet all of

these

fearsome legends are really only the outer shell of the novel's real heart, where

there stands a

woman who may be Eva Galli . . . or Alma Mobley . . . or Anna Mostyn . . . or

possibly a little

girl in a dirty pink dress whose name, supposedly, is Angie Maule. What are you? Don

asks. I

am you, she responds. And that is where the heartbeat of this extraordinary book

seems the

strongest. What is the ghost, after all, that it should frighten us so, but our own

face? When we

observe it we become like Narcissus, who was so struck by the beauty of his own

reflection

that he lost his life. We fear the Ghost for much the same reason we fear the Werewolf: it is the deep part of us that need not be bound by piffling Apollonian restrictions. It can walk through walls, disappear, speak in the voices of strangers. It is the Dionysian part of us . . . but it is still us.

Straub seems aware that he is carrying a basket dangerously overloaded with horrors, and turns the fact splendidly to his own advantage. The characters themselves feel that they have entered a horror story; the protagonist, Don Wanderley, is a writer of horror stories, and within the town of Milburn, New York, which becomes the world of this novel, there is the smaller world of Clark Mulligan's Rialto Theater, which is showing a horror-movie festival during the book's progress: a microcosm within the macrocosm. In one of the book's key scenes Gregory Bate throws one of the book's good guys, young Peter Barnes, through the movie screen while *Night of the Living Dead* is showing in the empty theater. The town of Milburn has become snowed in and overrun with the living dead, and at this point Barnes is literally thrown into the movie. It shouldn't work; it should be overt and cute. But Straub's firm

prose maker it work. It preserves Straub's hall-of-mirrors approach (three of the book's

epigrams are Straub's own free rendering of the Narcissus story), which keeps us constantly

aware that the face looking out of all those mirrors is also the face looking in; the book

suggests we need ghost stories because we, in fact, are the ghosts.* Is this really such a

difficult or paradoxical idea when you consider how short our lives are in a wider life-scheme

where redwoods live two thousand years and the Galapagos sea turtles may live for a thousand?

Most of Ghost Story's power comes from the fact that of the four archetypes we have discussed, the Ghost is the most potent. The concept of the Ghost is to the good novel of the

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supernatural what the concept of the Mississippi is to Twain's Huckleberry

Finn-really more

than symbol or archetype, it is a major part of that myth-pool in which we all must bathe. "Don't

you want to hear about the manifestations of the different spirits in her?" the younger priest

asks the older before they go up to Regan MacNeil before the final confrontation in

The

Exorcist. He begins to enumerate them, and Father Merrin cuts him off curtly: "There is only one."

And although Ghost Story clanks and roars with the trappings of vampirism and werewolvbery and flesh-eating ghouls, there is really only Alma/Anna/Ann-Veronica . . . and little

Angie Maule. She is described by Don Wanderley as a shape-changer (what the Indians called

a manitou), but even this is a branch rather than the taproot; all of these manifestations are like

the up cards in a hand of stud poker. When we turn over the hole card, the one that makes the

hand, we find the central card of our Tarot hand: the Ghost.

We know that ghosts aren't inherently evil-in fact, most of us have heard or read of a case

or cases where ghosts have been rather helpful; the shade who told Auntie Clarissa not to take

that plane or who warned Grampy Vic to go home fast because the house was catching on

fire. My mother told me that after suffering a near -fatal heart attack, a close friend of hers had

a visit from Jesus Christ in his hospital room. Jesus

*At one point, while under strain, Don gives a long, rambling lecture to an undergraduate class on the subject of

Stephen Crane. In the course of his talk he describes The Red Badge of Courage as "a great ghost story in which

the ghost never appears." Considering the book's moody approach to the subjects of cowardice and bravery, it is

an oddly apt description of that novel.

just opened the door of Emil's I.C. room and asked him how he was doing. Emil allowed as

how he was afraid he was a goner, and asked Jesus if He had come to take him. "Not yet,"

Jesus said, leaning casually against the door. "You've got another six years in you. Relax." He

then left. Emil recovered. That was in 1953; I heard the story from my mother around 1957.

Emil died in 1959-six years after his heart attack.

I have even had some truckle with "good ghosts" in my own work; near the end of The Stand, Nick Andros, a character who has been killed earlier in an explosion, returns to tell

half-witted but good-hearted Tom Cullen how to care for the novel's hero, Stu Redman, after

Stu has fallen gravely ill with pneumonia. But for the purposes of the horror novel the ghosts

must be evil, and as a result we find ourselves back in a familiar place: examining the

Apollonian/ Dionysian conflict and watching for the mutant.

In Ghost Story, Don Wanderley is summoned by four old men who call themselves the Chowder Society. Don's uncle, the fifth member, died of an apparent heart attack the year

before while attending a party thrown for the mysterious actress Ann-Veronica Moore.

As with

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all good gothics, a summary of the plot beyond this basic situation would be

unfair-not

because the veteran reader of this material will find much that is new in the plot

(it would be

surprising if he, she, or we did, in light of Straub's intention to fuse as many of

the classic ghost

story elements as possible), but because a bare summary of any gothic makes the book

look

absurdly complex and labored. Most gothics are overplotted novels whose success or

failure

hinges on the author's ability to make you believe in the characters and partake of

the mood.

Straub succeeds winningly at this, and the novel's machinery runs well (although it

is extremely

loud machinery; as already pointed out, that is also one of the great attractions of

the gothicit's

PRETTY GODDAM LOUD!). The writing itself is beautifully tuned and balanced.

The bare situation is enough to delineate the conflict in Ghost Story; in its way it

is as clearly

a conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian as Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr.

Hyde, and

its moral stance, like that of most horror fiction, is firmly reactionary. Its

politics are the politics

of the four old men who make up the Chowder Society-Sears James and John Jaffrey are staunch Republicans, Lewis Benedikt owns what amounts to a medieval fiefdom in the woods,

and while we are told that Ricky Hawthorne was at one time a socialist, he may be the only

socialist in history who is so entranced by new ties that he feels an urge, we are told, to wear

them to bed. All of these men-as well as Don Wanderley and young Peter Barnes-are perceived by Straub as beings of courage and love and generosity (and as Straub himself has

pointed out in a later letter to me, none of these qualities run counter to the idea of reactionism;

in fact, they way well define it). In contrast, the female revenant (all of Straub's evil ghosts are

female) is cold and destructive, living only for revenge. When Don makes love to this creature

in its Alma Mobley incarnation, he touches her in the night and feels "a shock of concentrated

feeling, a shock of revulsion-as though I had touched a slug." And during a weekend spent

with her, Don wakes up and sees Alma standing at the window and looking blankly out at the

fog. He asks her if anything is wrong, and she replies. At first he persuades himself that her

reply has been "I saw a ghost." A later truth forces him to admit she may have said

"I am a

ghost." A final act of memory retrieval convinces him that she has said something

far more

telling: "You are a ghost."

The battle for Milburn, New York- and for the lives of the last three members of the

Chowder Society-commences. The lines are clearly and simply drawn for all the

complexities

of plot and the novel's shifting voices. We have three old men, one young man, and

one

teenage boy watching for the mutant. The mutant arrives. In the end, a victor

emerges. This is

standard enough stuff. What distinguishes it-what "brings it up"-is Straub's

mirroring effect.

Which Alma is the real Alma? Which evil is the real evil? As previously noted, it is

usually easy

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to divide horror novels in another way-those that deal with "inside evil" (as in Dr.

Jekyll and Mr.

Hyde) and those that deal with "outside" or predestinate evil (as in Dracula). But

occasionally a

book comes along where it is impossible to discover exactly where that line is. The

Haunting of

Hill House is such a book; Ghost Story is another. A great many writers who have

attempted

the horror story have also realized that it is exactly this blurring about where the evil is coming from that differentiates the good or the merely effective from the great, but realization and execution are two different things, and in attempting to produce the paradox, most succeed only in producing a muddle Lovers Living, Lovers Dead by Richard Lutz is one example.

This is a case where you either hit the target dead-bang or miss it altogether. Straub hits it.

"I really wanted to expand things much more than I ever had before," Straub says. "I wanted to work on a large canvas. 'Salem's Lot' showed me how to do this without getting lost among a lot of minor characters. Besides the large canvas, I also wanted a certain largeness of effect I had been imbued with the notion that horror stories are best when they are ambiguous and low key and restrained. Reading ['Salem's Lot'], I realized that idea was self-defeating. Horror stories were best when they were big and gaudy, when the natural operatic quality in them was let loose. So part of the 'expansion' was an expansion of effect-I wanted to work up to big climaxes, create more tension than I ever had, build in big big scares. What all

this means is

that my ambition was geared up very high. Very much on my mind was doing something which

would be very literary, and at the same time take on every kind of ghost situation I could think

of. Also I wanted to play around with reality, to make the characters confused about what was

actually real. So: I built in situations in which they feel they are 1.) acting out roles in a book;

2.) watching a film; 3.) hallucinating; 4.) dreaming; 5.) transported into a private fantasy. * This

kind of thing, I think, is what our kind of book can do very well, what it is naturally suited to do.

The material is sort of naturally absurd and unbelievable, and therefore suits a narrative in

which the characters are bounced around a whole set of situations, some of which they know

rationality to be false. And it seemed fitting to me that this kind of plot would emerge from a

group of men telling stories-it was self-referring, which always pleases me very deeply in

novels. If the structure had a relationship to the events, the book has more resonance."

He offers a final anecdote about writing the book: "There was one very happy accident

Just when I was going to start the second part, two Jehovah's Witnesses showed up on

the

doorstep, and I bought three or four pamphlets from them. One . . . had a headline about Dr.

Rabbitfoot-this was for a story written by a trombonist named Trummy Young, who once played with Louis Armstrong. Dr. Rabbitfoot was a minstrel trombonist he saw as a

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child. So I

immediately fastened on the name, and started Book Two with the character."

In the course of the novel, young Peter Barnes is picked up either by Alma Mobley or another so-called "nightwatcher" while hitching a ride. In this shape, the supernatural creature

is a small, tubby man in a blue car-a Jehovah's Witness. He gives Peter a copy of

The

Watchtower, which is forgotten by the reader in the explosive course of events over the next

forty pages or so. Straub has not forgotten, though. Later, after telling his story to Don

Wanderley, Peter is able to produce the pamphlet the Jehovah's Witness has given him. The

headline reads: DR. RABBITFOOT LED ME TO SIN.

One wonders if this was the headline of the actual copy of The Watchtower which the Jehovah's Witness sold to Straub in his London home as he worked out the first draft of Ghost

Story.

*The best of these occurs when Lewis Benedikt goes to his death. He sees a bedroom door formed by an interlocking spray of pine needles while hunting in the woods. He goes through the door and into a deadly fantasyland.

3

Let us move now from ghosts to the natural (or unnatural, if you prefer) habitat of ghosts: the haunted house. There are haunted-house stories beyond numbering, most of them not very good (The Cellar, by Richard Laymon, is one example of the less successful breed). But this little subgenre has also produced a number of excellent books. I'll not credit the haunted house as a genuine card in the Tarot hand of the supernatural myth, but I will suggest that we might widen our field of enquiry a bit and find that we have discovered another of those springs which feed the myth-pool. For want of a better name, we might call this particular archetype the Bad Place, a term which encompasses much more than the fallen-down house at the end of Maple Street with the weedy lawn, the broken windows, and the moldering FOR SALE sign. It is neither my purpose nor my place here to discuss my own work, but readers of it will

know that I've dealt with the archetype of the Bad Place at least twice, once obliquely (in 'Salem's Lot) and once directly (in The Shining). My interest in the subject began when a friend and I took it into our heads to explore the local "haunted house"-a decrepit manse on the Deep Cut Road in my home town of Durham, Maine. This place, in the manner of deserted dwellings, was called after the name of the last residents. So in town it was just the Marsten House.

This ramshackle abode stood on a hill high enough to overlook a good part of our section of town-a section known as Methodist Corners. It was full of fascinating junk-medicine bottles with no labels which still had odd and vile -smelling liquids in them, stacks of moldy magazines

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(JAPS COME OUT OF THEIR RAT-HOLES ON IWO! proclaimed the blurb on one yellowed issue of Argosy), a piano with at least twenty-five dead keys, paintings of long-dead people whose eyes seemed to follow you, rusty silverware, a few pieces of furniture. The door was locked and there was a No TRESPASSING sign nailed to it (so old and faded

it was barely legible), but this did not stop us; such signs rarely stop

self-respecting

ten-year-olds. We simply went in through an unlocked window.

After having explored the downstairs thoroughly (and ascertained to our satisfaction

that the

old-fashioned sulphur matches we had found in the kitchen would no longer light but

only

produce a foul smell), we went upstairs. Unknown to us, my brother and cousin, two

and four

years older than my friend and I, had crept in after us. As the two of us poked

through the

upstairs bedrooms, they began to play horrible, jagged chords on the piano down in

the living

room.

My buddy and I screamed and clutched each other-for a moment the terror was

complete.

Then we heard those two dorks laughing downstairs and we grinned at each other

shamefacedly. Nothing really of which to be afraid; just a couple of older boys

scaring the old

Irish bejaysus out of a couple of younger ones. No, nothing really of which to be

afraid, but I

don't recall that we ever returned there. Certainly not after dark. There might have

been . . .

things. And that was not even a really Bad Place.

Years later I read a speculative article which suggested that so-called "haunted

houses"

might actually be psychic batteries, absorbing the emotions that had been spent there,

absorbing them much as a car battery will store an electric charge. Thus, the article went on,

the psychic phenomena we call "hauntings" might really be a kind of paranormal movie showthe

broadcasting back of old voices and images which might be parts of old events.

And the

fact that many haunted houses are shunned and get the reputation of being Bad Places might

be due to the fact that the strongest emotions are the primitive ones-rage and hate and fear.

I did not accept the ideas in this article as gospel truth-it seems to me that the writer who

deals with psychic phenomena in his or her fiction has a responsibility to deal with such

phenomena respectfully but not in a state of utter, worshipful belief-but I did find the idea

interesting, both for the idea itself and because it suggested a vague but intriguing referent in

my own experience: that the past is a ghost which haunts our present lives constantly. And

with my rigorous Methodist upbringing, I began to wonder if the haunted house could not be

turned into a kind of symbol of unexpiated sin . . . an idea which turned out to be

pivotal in the

novel *The Shining*.

I guess I liked the idea itself--as divorced from any symbolism or moral

reference--because

it's always been difficult for me to understand why the dead would want to hang

around old

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deserted houses, clanking chains and groaning spectrally to frighten the passerby .

. . if they

could go elsewhere. It sounds like a drag to me. The theory suggested that the

inhabitants

might indeed have gone on, leaving only a psychic residue behind. But even so (as

Kenneth

Patchen says), that did not rule out the possibility that the residue might be

extremely harmful,

as lead-based paint can be harmful to children who eat flakes of it years after it

has been

applied.

My experience in the Marsten House with my friend crosspatched with this article and

with a

third element-teaching Stoker's *Dracula*-create the fictional Marsten House, which

stands

overlooking the little town of Jerusalem's Lot from its eminence not far from the

Harmony Hill

Cemetery. But *'Salem's Lot* is a book about vampires, not hauntings; the Marsten

House is

really only a curlicue, the gothic equivalent of an appendix. It was there, but it

wasn't doing

much except lending atmosphere (it becomes a little more important in Tobe Hooper's

TV-film

version, but its major function still seems to be to stand up there on that hill and

look broody).

So I went back to the house-as-psycho-battery idea and tried to write a story in

which that

concept would take center stage. The Shining is set in the apotheosis of the Bad

Place: not a

haunted house but a haunted hotel, with a different "real" horror movie playing in

almost every

one of its guest room and suites.

I needn't point out that the list of possible Bad Places does not begin with haunted

houses

and end with haunted hotels; there have been horror stories written about haunted

railroad

stations, automobiles, meadows, office buildings. The list is endless, and probably

all of it goes

back to the caveman who had to move out of his hole in the rock because he heard

what

sounded like voices back there in the shadows. Whether they were actual voices or

the voices

of the wind is a question we still ask ourselves on dark nights.

I want to talk here about two stories dealing with the archetype of the Bad Place,
one good,
one great. As it happens, both deal with haunted houses. Fair enough, I think;
haunted cars
and railway stations are nasty, but your house is the place where you're supposed to
be able
to unbutton your armor and put your shield away. Our homes are the places where we
allow
ourselves the ultimate vulnerability: they are the places where we take off our
clothes and go
to sleep with no guard on watch (except perhaps for those ever more popular drones
of
modern society, the smoke-detector and the burglar alarm). Robert Frost said home is
the
place that, when you go there, they have to take you in. The old aphorisms say that
home is
where the heart is, there's no place like home, that a heap of lovin' can make a
house a home.

We are abjured to keep the home fires burning, and when fighter pilots finish their
missions

they radio that they are "coming home." And even if you are a stranger in a strange

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land, you

can usually find a restaurant that will temporarily assuage your homesickness as
well as your

hunger with a big plate of home-cooked home fries.

It doesn't hurt to emphasize again that horror fiction is a cold touch in the midst of the

familiar, and good horror fiction applies this cold touch with sudden, unexpected pressure.

When we go home and shoot the bolt on the door, we like to think we're locking trouble out.

The good horror story about the Bad Place whispers that we are not locking the world out; we

are locking ourselves in . . . with them.

Both of these tales adhere quite stringently to the conventional haunted-house formula; we

are allowed to see a chain of hauntings, working together to reinforce the concept of the house

as a Bad Place. One might even say that the truest definition of the haunted house would be "a

house with an unsavory history." The author must do more than simply bring on a repertory

company of ghosts, complete with clanking chains, doors that bang open or shut in the middle

of the night, and strange noises in the attic or the cellar (the attic's especially good for a bit of

low, throbbing terror-when was the last time you explored yours with a candle during a power

failure while a strong autumn wind blew outside?); the haunted-house tale demands a

historical context.

Both *The House Next Door*, by Anne Rivers Siddons (1978), and *The Haunting of Hill House*,

by Shirley Jackson (1959), provide this historical context. Jackson establishes it immediately

in the first paragraph of her novel, stating her tale's argument in lovely, dreamlike prose:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane,

stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and

might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were

firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill

House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

I think there are few if any descriptive passages in the English language that are any finer

than this; it is the sort of quiet epiphany every writer hopes for: words that somehow transcend

words, words which add up to a total greater than the sum of the parts. Analysis of such a

paragraph is a mean and shoddy trick, and should almost always be left to college and

university professors, those lepidopterists of literature who, when they see a

lovely butterfly,

feel that they should immediately run into the field with a net, catch it, kill it

with a drop of

chloroform, and mount it on a white board and put it in a glass case, where it will

still be

beautiful . . . and just as dead as horseshit.

Having said that, let us analyze this paragraph a bit. I promise not to kill it or

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mount it,

however; I have neither the skill nor the inclination (but show me any graduate

thesis in the

field of English/ American lit, and I will show you a mess of dead butterflies, most

of them killed

messily and mounted inexpertly). We'll just stun it for a moment or two and then let

it fly on.

All I really want to do is point out how many things this single paragraph does. It

begins by

suggesting that Hill House is a live organism; tells us that this live organism does

not exist

under conditions of absolute reality; that because (although here I should add that

I may be

making an induction Mrs. Jackson did not intend) it does not dream, it is not sane.

The

paragraph tells us how long its history has been, immediately establishing that

historical

context that is so important to the haunted-house story, and it concludes by telling us that

something walks in the rooms and halls of Hill House. All of this in two sentences.

Jackson introduces an even more unsettling idea by implication. She suggests that Hill

House looks all right on the surface. It is not the creepy old Marsten place from 'Salem's Lot

with its boarded-up windows, mangy roof, and peeling walls. It's not the tumble-down brooding

place at the ends of all those dead-end streets, those places where children throw rocks by

daylight and fear to venture after dark. Hill House is looking pretty good. But then, Norman

Bates was looking pretty good, too, at least on the surface. There are no drafts in Hill House,

but it (and those foolish enough to go there, we presume) does not exist under conditions of

absolute reality; therefore, it does not dream; therefore, it is not sane. And, apparently, it kills.

If Shirley Jackson presents us with a history-a sort of supernatural provenance-as a starting point, then Anne Rivers Siddons gives us the provenance itself.

The House Next Door is a novel only in terms of its first-person narrator, Colquitt Kennedy,

who lives with her husband, Walter, next to the haunted house. We see Their lives and their

way of thinking change as a result of their proximity to the house, and the novel establishes

itself, finally, when Colquitt and Walter feel impelled to "step into the story."

This happens quite

satisfyingly in the book's closing fifty pages, but during much of the book Colquitt and Walter

are very much sideline characters. The book is compartmentalized into three longish sections,

and each is really a story in itself. We are given the story of the Harralsons, the Sheehans, and

the Greenes, and we see the house next door mainly through their experiences. In other

words, while *The Haunting of Hill House* provides us with a supernatural provenance-the

bride whose carriage overturned, killing her seconds before she was to get her first glimpse of

Hill House, for example-merely as background stuff, *The House Next Door* could have been

subtitled "The Making of a Haunted House."

This approach works well for Ms. Siddons, who does not write prose with the beautiful

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simplicity of Mrs. Jackson, but who nevertheless acquits herself well and honorably here. The

book is well planned and brilliantly cast ("People like us don't appear in People magazine," the first sentence of the book reads, and Colquitt goes on to tell us just how she and her husband, two private people, ended up not only in People magazine, but ostracized by their neighbors, hated by city realtors, and ready to burn the house next door to the ground). This is no gothic manse covered with drifting tatters of fog off the moor; there are no battlements, no moats, not even a widow's walk Whoever heard of such things in suburban Atlanta, anyway? When the story opens, the haunted house hasn't even been built. Colquitt and Walter live in a rich and comfortable section of suburban Atlanta. The machinery of social intercourse in this suburb-a suburb of a New South city where many of the Old South virtues still hold, Colquitt tells us-is smoothly running and almost silent, well oiled with u.m.c. money. Next to their home is a wooded lot which has never been developed because of the difficult topography. Enter Kim Dougherty, young hotshot architect; he builds a contemporary home on the lot that fits the land like a glove. In fact . . . it looks almost alive. Colquitee writes of her first look at the house plans:

I drew my breath at it. It was magnificent. I do not as a rule care for contemporary

architecture, [but] . . This house was different. It commanded you, somehow, yet
soothed
you. It grew out of the penciled earth like an elemental spirit that had lain,
locked and
yearning for the light, through endless deeps of time, waiting to be released . . .
. I could
hardly imagine the hands and machinery that would form it. I thought of something
that had
started with a seed, put down deep roots, grown in the sun and rains of many years
into the
upper air. In the sketches, at least, the woods pressed untouched around it like
companions. The creek enfolded its mass and seemed to nourish its roots. It looked inevitable.
Events follow in ordained fashion. Dionysian change is coming to this Apollonian
suburb
where hitherto there has been a place for everything and everything is in its place.
That night,
when Colquitt hears an owl hooting in the woodlot where Dougherty's house will soon
go up,
she finds herself tying a knot in the corner of her bedsheet to ward off bad luck,
as her
grandmother did.
Dougherty is building the house for a young couple, the Harralsons (but he would
have been
just as happy building it for Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun, he tells the Kennedys over
drinks; it's

the house that interests him, not the owners). Buddy Harralson is an up-and-coming young lawyer. His little-girl-Chi-Omega-Junior-Leaguer wife, hideocomically known as Pie (as in Punkin Pie, her daddy's nickname), loses first her baby to the house in a miscarriage which occurs there when she's four months pregnant, then her dog, and finally, on the evening of her

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danse macabre Stephen King housewarming, everything else.

Exit Harralsons, enter Sheehans. Buck and his wife, Anita, are trying to recover from the loss of their only child, who went down in a flaming helicopter while serving in Vietnam. Anita, who is recovering from a mental breakdown as a result of the loss (which dovetails a little too neatly with the loss of her father and brother years before in a similar accident), begins to see movies of her son's horrible death on the television in the house. A neighbor who is helping out also catches part of this lethal film. Other stuff happens . . . there is a climax . . . and exit Sheehans. Then, last but hardly least in terms of the grand guignol, comes the Greenes.

If all this sounds familiar, it comes as no surprise to either of us. The House Next

Door is a frame story, the sort of thing one likes to speculate, that Chaucer might have done if he had written for *Weird Tales*. It is a form of horror tale that the movies have tried more often than novelists or short-story writers. In fact, the moviemakers seem to have tried a good many times to put a dictum that critics of the genre have handed down for years into actual practice: that the horror tale works best when it is brief and comes directly to the point (most people associate that dictum with Poe, but Coleridge stated it before him, and in fact Poe was offering a guideline for the writer of all short stories, not just those dealing with the supernatural and the occult). Interestingly enough, the dictum seems to fail in actual practice. Most horror movies employing the frame-story device to tell three or four short tales work unevenly or not at all. *

*But there are exceptions to every rule, obviously. While two adaptations of old EC-comics horror yarns, *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror*, are miserable failures, Robert Bloch did two "frame-story" films for the British Amicus production company, *The House that Dripped Blood* and *Asylum*. The stories in both of these were

adapted from Bloch's own short stories, and both are good fun. Of course, the champ
is still *Dead of Night*, the
1946 British film starring Michael Redgrave and directed by Robert Hamer,
Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, and
Basil Dearden.

Does *The House Next Door* work? I think it does. It doesn't work as well as it could
work, and
the reader is left with what may be the wrong set of ambiguities about Walter and
Colquitt
Kennedy, but still, it works.

"[*The House Next Door*] came about, I suspect," Ms. Siddons writes, "because I have
always been fond of the horror or occult genre, or whatever you may call it. It
seemed to me
that most of my favorite writers had tackled the ghost story at one time or another:

Henry
James, Edith Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Dickens, et al., and I have enjoyed the
more
contemporary writers in the genre as much as I have the old classicists. Shirley
Jackson's *Hill*

House is as nearly perfect a haunted-house tale as I have ever read . . . and {my

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favorite of all

time, I think is} M. F. K. Fisher's enchanting little *The Lost, Strayed, Stolen*.

"The point would seem to be that, as every foreword to every anthology of horror
stories you

ever read assures you, the ghost story is timeless; it cuts across all lines of culture and class

and all levels of sophistication; it communicates immediately somewhere in the vicinity of the

base of your spine, and touches that crouching thing in all of us that still peers in abject terror

past the fire into the dark beyond the cave door. If all cats are gray in the dark, so, basically,

are all people afraid of it.

"The haunted house has always spoken specially and directly to me as the emblem of particular horror. Maybe it's because, to a woman, her house is so much more than that: it is

kingdom, responsibility, comfort, total world to her . . . to most of us, anyway, whether or not

we are aware of it. It is an extension of ourselves; it tolls in answer to one of the most basic

chords mankind will ever hear. My shelter. My earth. My second skin. Mine. So basic is it that

the desecration of it, the corruption, as it were, by something alien takes on a peculiar and

bonedeeep horror and disgust. It is both frightening and . . . violating, like a sly, terrible burglar.

A house askew is one of the not-rightest things in the world, and is terrible out of all proportion

to its actual visitant

"I came to write of a new house that was . . . let's say malignant . . . for the
very simple
reason that I wanted to see if I could write a good ghost story . . . I was tired
and rather
simple-minded from a two-year stint of heavy, serious, 'writery' writing, yet I
wanted to be at
work, and thought the ghost story would be fun . . . and as I was casting about in
my mind for a
good hook, or handle, a young architect bought the lovely, wooded lot next to our
house and
began to build a contemporary house on it. My writing room, upstairs under the eaves
of our
old house, looks right into the lot next door, and I would sit and stare dreamily
out my window
and watch the wild woods and hills go down and the house go up, and one day the
inevitable
'What if' that starts all writers writing bloomed in my mind, and we were off. 'What
if,' I thought,
'instead of an ancient haunted priory on the coast of Cornwall or a
pre-Revolutionary
farmhouse in Bucks County with a visitant or two, or even the ruins of an antebellum
plantation
house with a hoopskirted spectre wailing around the desecrated chimney for her lost
world,
you had a brand-new contemporary going up in an affluent suburb of a large city?
You'd

expect the priory and the farmhouse and the plantation to be haunted. But the contemporary?

Wouldn't that give it an even meaner, nastier, little fillip? Serve to emphasize by contrast and

horror? I thought it would

"I'm still not sure how I arrived at the idea that the house would use its sheer loveliness to

attract people, and then begin to turn their own deepest weaknesses, their soft

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spots, against

them. It seemed to me that in this day of pragmatists and materialists, a

conventional spectre

would be almost laughable; in the suburb that I envisioned, the people do not

believe in that

sort of thing; it is almost improper. A traditional ghoulie would be laughed out of

the

neighborhood. So what would get to my quasi-sophisticated suburbanite? What would

break

relationships and crumble defenses and penetrate suburban armors? It would have to

be

different in each case. Each person has his own built-in horror button. Let's have a

house that

can isolate and push it, and then you've really got a case of the suburban willies.

"The plot of the book emerged in one typewriter sitting almost whole and in infinite

detail, as

though it had been there all along just waiting to be uncovered The House

Next Door was

plotted and whole in a day. From there it looked to be great fun, and I set off on

it with a light

heart, because I thought it would be an easy book to write. And in a sense, it was:

these are

my people. I am of this world. I know them from the skin out. They were of course,

caricatures

in most cases; most of the people I know are, thankfully, far more eccentric and not

so

determinedly suburban as this set of folks. But I needed them to be the way they

were to make

a point. And I found the limning of them went like greased lightning.

"Because the whole point of this book, of course, is not so much the house and its

peculiar,

terrible power, but what effect it has on the neighborhood, and on the relationships

between

neighbors and friends, and between families, when they are forced to confront and

believe the

unbelievable. This has always been the power of the supernatural to me . . . that it

blasts and

breaks relationships between people and other people and between people and their

world

and, in a way, between people and the very essences of themselves. And the blasting

and

breaking leaves them defenseless and alone, howling in terror before the thing that they have

been forced to believe. For belief is everything; belief is all. Without belief, there is no terror.

And I think it is even more terrible when a modern man or woman, girded round with privilege

and education and all the trappings of the so-called good life and all the freight of the clever,

pragmatic, vision-hungry modern mind, is forced to confront utter, alien, and elemental evil and

terror. What does he know of this, what has it to do with him? What has the unspeakable and

the unbelievable got to do with second homes and tax shelters and private schools for the kids

and a pâté in every terrine and a BMW in every garage? Primitive man might howl before his

returning dead and point; his neighbor would see, and howl along with him

The resident

of Fox Run Chase who meets a ghoulie out by the hot tub is going to be frozen dead in his or

her Nikes on the tennis courts the next day if he or she persists in gabbling about it. And there

he is, alone with the horror and ostracized on all sides. It's a double turn of the

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screw, and I

thought it would make a good story.

"I still think it did . . . I think it holds up well . . . But it is only now that

I am able to read the

book with any equanimity. About a third of the way through it, the writing ceased to

be fun and

became something as oppressive to me as it was obsessive; I realized I was into

something

vast and terrible and not at all funny; I was hurting and destroying people or

allowing them to

be hurt and destroyed, which amounts to the same thing. There is in me . . . some

leftover

streak of Puritan ethic, or squinty-eyed Calvinistic morality, that insists that

THINGS MUST

HAVE A POINT. I dislike anything gratuitous. Evil must not be allowed to get away

unpunished, even though I know that it does, every day. Ultimately . . . there must

be a day of

reckoning for the Bad Thing, and I still have no idea if this is a strength or

weakness It

certainly does not lend itself to subtleties, but I do not see myself as a 'clever'

writer. And so

The House Next Door became very serious business indeed to me; I knew that Colquitt

and

Walter Kennedy, whom I really liked very much indeed, would be destroyed by the

house they

in turn destroyed at the end of the book, but to me there was very real gallantry in

the fact that
they knew this themselves, and went ahead anyway . . . I was glad they did not run
away . . . I
would hope that, faced with something as overwhelmingly vast and terrible and left
with so few
options, I would have the grace and courage to do as they did. I speak of them as
though they
were outside my control because I feel as if they are, and most of the way through
the book I
felt this There is an inevitability about the outcome . . . that, to me, was
inherent even on
the first page of the book. It happened this way because this is the way it would
have
happened in this time and this place to these people. That is a satisfying feeling
to me, and it is
not one that I have had about all my books. And so in that sense, I feel that it
succeeds
"On its simplest level, I think it works well as a piece of horror fiction that
depends on the
juxtaposition of the unimaginably terrible with the utterly ordinary . . . the
wonderful Henry
James 'terror in sunlight' syndrome. Rosemary's Baby is the absolute master of this
particular
device, and it was that quality, in part, that I strove for. I also feel good about
the fact that, to

me, all the characters are still extremely sympathetic people, even this long after writing and

after this many rereadings. I cared very much what happened to them as I unveiled them on

the pages, and I still care about them.

"Maybe it succeeds, too, in being an utterly contemporary horror tale. Maybe this is the

wave of the future. It isn't the thing that goes bump in your house in the night that is going to do

you in in this brave new world; it's your house itself. In a world where the very furniture of your

life, the basic bones of your existence, turn terrible and strange, perhaps the only

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thing we're

going to have to fall back on is whatever innate decency we can find deep within ourselves. In

a way, I do not think this is a bad thing."

A phrase that stands out in Siddon's analysis of her own work—at least it stands out to me is

this one: ". . . to me there was very real gallantry," she says, "in the fact that they knew this

themselves, and went ahead anyway . . ." We might think of this as a uniquely Southern

sentiment, and as ladylike as she is, Anne Rivers Siddons is squarely in a Southern tradition of

gothic writers.

She tells us she has jettisoned the ruins of the antebellum plantation, and so she

has, but in

a wider sense, *The House Next Door* is very much the same spooky, tumble-down

plantation

home where writers as seemingly disparate but as essentially similar as William

Faulkner,

Harry Crews, and Flannery O'Connor-probably the greatest American shortstory writer

of the

postwar era-have lived before her. It is a home where even such a really gruesomely

bad

writer as William Bradford Huie has rented space from time to time.

If the Southern experience were to be viewed as untilled soil, then we would have to

say

that almost any writer, no matter how good or bad, who deeply feels that Southern

experience

could plant a seed and have it grow-as an example I recommend Thomas Cullinan's

novel

The Beguiled (made into a good Clint Eastwood film, directed by Don Siegel). Here is

a novel

which is "written pretty good," as a friend of mine likes to put it-meaning, of

course, nuthin'

special. No Saul Bellow, no Bernard Malamud, but at least not down there in steerage

with

people like Harold Robbins and Sidney Sheldon, who apparently wouldn't know the

difference

between a balanced line of prose and a shit-and-anchovy pizza. If Cullinan had
elected to write

a more conventional novel, it would stick out in no one's mind. Instead, he came up
with this

mad gothic tale about a Union soldier who loses his legs and then his life to the
deadly angels

of mercy who dwell in a ruined girls' school that has been left behind in Sherman's
march to

the sea. This is Cullinan's little acre of that patch of untilled soil, soil which
has always been

amazingly rich. One is tempted to believe that outside of the South, such an idea
wouldn't raise

much more than ragweed. But in this soil, it grows a vine of potent, crazed
beauty-the reader

is mesmerized with horror by what goes on in that forgotten school for young ladies.

On the other hand, William Faulkner did more than drop a few seeds; he planted the
whole

damn garden . . . and everything he turned his hand to after 1930, when he really
discovered

the gothic form for fair, seemed to come up. The essence of the Southern gothic in
Faulkner's

work comes, for me, in Sanctuary, when Popeye stands on the scaffold, about to be
hung. He

has combed his hair neatly for the occasion, but now, with the rope around his neck
and his

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hands tied behind his back, his hair has fallen lankly across his forehead. He

begins to jerk his

head, trying to flip his hair back into place. "I'll fix that for you," the

executioner tells him, and

pulls the trigger on the scaffold's trapdoor. Exit Popeye, with hair in his face. I

believe with all

my heart that no one brought up north of the Mason-Dixon Line could have thought of

that

scene, or written it right if he or she had done. Ditto the long, lurid, and

excruciating scene in

the doctor's waiting room which opens Flannery O'Connor's novella "Revelation."

There are no

doctor's waiting rooms like that outside the Southern imagination; holy Jesus, what

a crew.

My point is that there is something frighteningly lush and fertile in the Southern

imagination,

and this seems particularly so when it turns into the gothic channel.

The case of the Harralsons, the first family to inhabit the Bad Place in Siddons's

novel

shows quite clearly how the author has put her own Southern gothic imagination to

work. Pie

Harralson, the girl-wife-ChiOmega-Junior-Leaguer, wields an unhealthy sort of

attraction over

her father, a beefy, choleric man from the "wire grass south." Pie seems quite aware that her

husband, Buddy, makes a triangle with her at the apex and daddy at one of the lower corners.

She plays the two of them off one another. The house itself is only another pawn in the

love-hate-love affairs she seems to be having with her father ("That weird thing she has with

him," one character says dismissively). Near the end of her first conversation with Colquitt and

Walter, Pie says gleefully: "Oh, Daddy's just going to hate this house! Oh, he's going to be fit to

be tied!"

Buddy, meanwhile, has been taken under the wing of Lucas Abbott, a new arrival at the law

office where Buddy works. Abbott is a Northerner, and we hear passingly that Abbott left New

York as the result of a scandal: ". . . something about a law clerk."

The house next door, which turns people's own deepest weaknesses against them, as Siddons says, fuses these elements neatly and horribly. Near the end of the

housewarming

party, Pie begins to scream. The guests rush to see what has happened to her. They find

Buddy Harralson and Lucas Abbott embracing, naked, in the bedroom where the coats have

been left. Pie's Daddy has found them first, and he is in the process of expiring of

a stroke on

the floor while his Punkin Pie screams on . . . and on . . . and on.

Now if that isn't Southern gothic, what is?

The essence of the horror in this scene (which for some reason reminds me strongly of that

heart-stopping moment in Rebecca where the nameless narrator stops the party cold by floating down the stairs in the costume also worn by Maxim's dreadful first wife)

lies in the fact

that social codes have not merely been breached; they have been exploded in our shocked

faces. Siddons pulls this particular dynamite blast off perfectly. It is a case of everything going

just about as totally wrong as things can go; lives and careers are ruined

irrevocably in a

passage of seconds.

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We need not analyze the psyche of the horror writer; nothing is so boring or so annoying as

people who ask things like. "Why are you so weird?" or "Was your mother scared by a two-headed dog while you were in utero?" Nor am I going to do that here, but I'll point out that

much of the walloping effect of The House Next Door comes from its author's nice grasp of

social boundaries. Any writer of the horror tale has a clear-perhaps even a morbidly

overdeveloped-conception of where the country of the socially (or morally, or psychologically)

acceptable ends and that great white space of Taboo begins. Siddons is better at marking the

edges of the socially acceptable from the socially nightmarish than most (although Daphne Du

Maurier comes to mind again), and I'll bet that she was taught young that you don't eat with

your elbows on the table . . . or make abnormal love in the coatroom.

She returns to the breach of social codes again and again (as she does in an earlier,

nonsupernatural novel about the south, Heartbreak Hotel), and on its most rational, symbolic

level, The House Next Door can be read as a funny-horrible sociological treatise on the mores

and folkways of the Modestly Suburban Rich. But beneath this, the heart of the Southern

gothic beats strongly. Colquitt tells us she could not bear to tell her closest friend what she saw

on the day when Anita Sheehan finally and irrevocably lost her mind, but she is able to tell us

in vivid, shocking detail. Horrified or not, Colquitt saw it all. She herself makes a "New

South/Old South" comparisons near the beginning of the novel, and the novel taken as a whole

is another. On the surface we see "the obligatory tobacco-brown Mercedeses,"

vacations at

Ocho Rios, Bloody Marys sprinkled thickly with fresh dill at Rinaldi's. But the

stuff underneath,

the stuff which makes the heart of this novel pulse with such a tremendous crude

strength, is

the Old South-the Southern gothic stuff. Underneath, *The House Next Door* is not

situated in

a tony Atlanta suburb at all; it is located in that grimly grotty country of the

heart that Flannery

O'Connor mapped so well. Scratch Colquitt Kennedy deeply enough and we find

O'Connor's

Mrs. Turpin, standing in her pigpen and waiting for a revelation.

If the book has a serious problem, it lies in our perception of Walter, Colquitt,

and the third

major character, Virginia Guthrie. Our feelings about these characters are not

particularly

sympathetic, and while it is not a rule that they should be, the reader may find it

hard to

understand why Siddons likes them, as she says she does. Through most of the book,

Colquitt

herself is particularly unappetizing: vain, class-conscious, money-conscious,

sexually priggish,

and vaguely exhibitionistic at the same time. "We like our lives and our possessions

to run

smoothly," she tells the reader with a maddening complacency early on. "Chaos,

violence,

disorder, mindlessness all upset us. They do not frighten us, precisely, because we are aware

of them. We watch the news, we are active in our own brand of rather liberal

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politics. We know

we have built a shell for ourselves, but we have worked hard for the means to do it; we have

chosen it. Surely we have the right to do that."

In all fairness, part of this is meant to set us up for the changes that Colquitt and Walter

undergo as a result of the supernatural didoes next door-that damned house is doing what

Bob Dylan called bringing it all back home. Siddons undoubtedly means to tell us that the

Kennedys eventually arrive at a new plateau of social consciousness; after the episode with

the Sheehans, Colquitt tells her husband: "You know, Walter, we've never stuck our necks out.

We've never put ourselves or anything we really value on the line. We've taken the best life

has to give . . . and we really haven't given anything back." If this is so, then

Siddons

succeeds. The Kennedys pay with their lives. The novel's problem may be that the reader is

apt to feel that the dues paid were fair ones.

Siddons's own view on just what the Kennedys' rising social consciousness means is

also

muddier than I would like. If it is a victory, it seems to be of the Pyrrhic

variety; their world has

been destroyed by their conviction that they must warn the world against the house

next door,

but their conviction seems to have given them remarkably little inner peace in

return-and the

book's kicker seems to indicate that their victory has a decidedly hollow ring.

Colquitt does not just put on her sun-hat when she goes out to do the garden; she

puts on

her Mexican sun-hat. She is justly proud of her job, but the reader may feel a bit

more uneasy

about her serene confidence in her own looks: "I have what I want and do not need

the

adulation of very young men, even though, I modestly admit, there have been some

around my

agency who have offered it." We know that she looks good in tight jeans; Colquitt

herself

helpfully points this out. We have the feeling that if the book had been written a

year or two

later, Colquitt would be pointing out that she looks good in her Calvin Klein jeans.

The point of

all this is that she's not a character most people will be able to hope for easily,

and whether or

not her personal tics help or hinder in the book's steady, downturning funnel toward disaster is

something that the reader will have to decide for herself or himself.

Equally problematic is the book's dialogue. At one point Colquitt hugs the newly arrived

Anita Sheehan and tells her, "Welcome to the neighborhood once again, Anita Sheehan.

Because you're a whole new lady and one I like immensely, and I hope you're going to be

very, very happy here." I don't quibble with the sentiment; I just wonder if people, even in the

South, really talk like this.

Let's say this: the major problem with *The House Next Door* is the muddiness of character

development. A lesser problem is one of actual execution—a problem that crops up mostly in

the dialogue, as the narration is adequate and the imagery often oddly beautiful.

But as a

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gothic, the book succeeds admirably.

Now let me suggest that, in addition to being a Southern gothic novel, Anne Rivers

Siddons's *The House Next Door*, whatever its shortcomings in terms of

characterization or

execution, succeeds on far more important ground; it is a prime example of what

Irving Malin

calls "the new American gothic"-so is Straub's Ghost Story, for that matter, although Straub seems much more clearly aware of the species of fish he has netted (the clearest indication of this is his use of the Narcissus myth and the spooky use of the lethal mirror).

John G. Park employed Malin's idea of the new American gothic in an article for Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction. * Park's article is on Shirley Jackson's novel The Sundial, but what he says about that book is equally applicable to a whole slew of American ghost and horror stories, including several of my own. Here is Malin's "list of ingredients" for the modern gothic, as explained by Park in his article.

First, a microcosm serves as the arena where universal forces collide. In the case of the Siddons book, the house next door serves as this microcosm.

Second, the gothic house functions as an image of authoritarianism, of imprisonment, or of "confining narcissism." By narcissism, Park and Malin seem to mean a growing obsession with one's own problems; a turning inward instead of a growing outward. The new American gothic provides a closed loop of character, and in what might be termed a psychological pathetic

fallacy, the physical surroundings often mimic the inwardturning of the characters themselves-as they do in *The Sundial*. **

This is an exciting, even fundamental change in the intent of the gothic. Once upon a time

the Bad Place was seen by critics as symbolic of the womb-a primarily sexual symbol which

perhaps allowed the gothic to become a safe way of talking about sexual fears. Park and Malin

are suggesting that the new American gothic, created primarily in the twenty or so years since

Shirley Jackson published *The Haunting of Hill House*, uses the Bad Place to symbolize sexual

interests and fear of sex but interest in the self and fear of the self . . . and if anyone should

ever ask you why there has been such a bulge in the popularity of horror fiction and horror

films over the last five years or so, you might point out to your questioner that the rise of the

horror film in the seventies and early eighties and the rise of such things as Rolfing, primal

screaming, and hot-tubbing run pretty much in tandem, and that most of the really popular

examples of the horror genre, from *The Exorcist* to Cronenberg's *They Came from Within*, are

fine examples of the new

*The article is "Waiting for the End: Shirley Jackson's *The Sundial*," by John G.

Park, Critique, Vol. XIX, No. 3,

1978.

**Or in *The Shining*, which was written with *The Sundial* very much in mind. In *The Shining*, the characters are snowbound and isolated in an old hotel miles from any help. Their world has shrunk

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and turned inward; the

Overlook Hotel becomes the microcosm where universal forces collide, and the inner weather mimics the outer

weather. Critics of Stanley Kubrick's film version would do well to remember that it was these elements,

consciously or unconsciously, which Kubrick chose to accentuate.

American gothic, where we have, instead of a symbolic womb, a symbolic mirror.

This may sound like a lot of academic bullshit, but it's really not. The purpose of horror

fiction is not only to explore taboo lands but to confirm our own good feelings about the status

quo by showing us extravagant visions of what the alternative might be. Like the scariest bad

dreams, the good creepshow often does its work by turning the status quo inside out-what

scares us the most about Mr. Hyde, perhaps, is the fact that he was a part of Dr.

Jekyll all

along. And in an American society that has become more and more entranced by the

cult of

me-ism, it should not be surprising that the horror genre has turned more and more

to trying to

show us a reflection we won't like-our own.

While looking at *The House Next Door*, we find we can lay the Tarot card of the Ghost

aside-there are no ghosts per se in the house which is owned by the Harralsons, the

Sheehans, and the Greenes. The card which seems to fit better here is the card that

always

seems to come up when we deal with narcissism: the card of the Werewolf. More

traditional

werewolf stories almost always-knowingly or unknowingly-mimic the classic story of

Narcissus; in the Lon Chaney, Jr., version, we observe Chaney observing himself in

the

Ever-Popular Pool of Water as he undergoes the transformation back from monster to

Larry

Talbot. We see the exact same scene occur in the original TV film of *The Incredible*

Hulk as

the Hulk returns to his David Banner form. In Hammer's *Curse of the Werewolf*, the

scene is

repeated yet again, only this time it's Oliver Reed who's watching himself undergo

the change.

The real problem with the house next door, we see, is that it changes people into

the very

things they most abhor. The real secret of the house next door is that it is a

dressing-room for

werewolves.

"Nearly all the characters of the new American gothic are narcissistic," Park sums

up, "in

one form or another, weaklings who try to read their own preoccupations into

reality." This

sums up Colquitt Kennedy, I think; and it also sums up Eleanor, the protagonist of

Shirley

Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*; and Eleanor Vance is surely the finest

character to

come out of this new American gothic tradition.

"The inspiration to write a ghost story," Lenemaja Friedman writes in her study of

Jackson's

work, "came to Miss Jackson . . . as she was reading a book about a group of

nineteenth-century psychic researchers who rented a haunted house in order to study

it and

record their impressions of what they had seen and heard for the purpose of

presenting a

treatise to the Society for Psychic Research. As she recalls: 'They thought they

were being

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terribly scientific and proving all kinds of things, and yet the story that kept

coming through

their dry reports was not at all the story of a haunted house, it was the story of

several earnest,

I believe misguided, certainly determined people, with their differing motivations

and

backgrounds.' The story so excited her that she could hardly wait to create her own

haunted

house and her own people to study it.

"Shortly thereafter, she states, on a trip to New York, she saw at the 125th Street

station, a

grotesque house-one so evil-looking, one that made such a somber impression, that

she had

nightmares about it long afterward. In response to her curiosity, a New York friend

investigated

and found that the house, intact from the front, was merely a shell since a fire had

gutted the

structure In the meantime, she was searching newspapers, magazines, and

books for

pictures of suitably hauntedlooking houses; and at last she discovered a magazine

picture of a

house that seemed just right. It looked very much like the hideous building she had

seen in

New York: ` . . . it had the same air of disease and decay, and if ever a house

looked like a

candidate for a ghost, it was this one.' The picture identified the house as being

in a California

town; consequently, hoping her mother in California might be able to acquire some

information

about the house, she wrote asking for help. As it happened, her mother was not only

familiar

with the house but provided the startling information that Miss Jackson's great-grandfather had built it." *

Heh-heh-heh, as the Old Witch used to say.

On its simplest level, Hill House follows the plan of those Psychic Society investigators of

whom Miss Jackson had read: it is a tale of four ghost-busters who gather in a house of ill

repute. It recounts their adventures there, and culminates with a scary, mystifying climax. The

ghost-busters-Eleanor, Theo, and Luke-have come together under the auspices of one Dr.

Montague, an anthropologist whose hobby is investigating psychic phenomena. Luke, a young

wise-guy type of fellow (memorably played by Russ Tamblyn in Robert Wise's sensitive film

version of the book), is there as a representative of the owner, his aunt; he regards the whole

thing as a lark . . . at least at first.

Eleanor and Theo have been invited for different reasons. Montague has combed the back

files of several psychic societies, and has sent invitations to a fairly large number of people

who have been involved with

*From Shirley Jackson, by Lenemaja Friedman (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p.

121. Ms. Friedman

quotes directly from Shirley Jackson's account of how the book came to be; Miss Jackson's account was published in an article entitled "Experience and Fiction."

"abnormal" events in the past-the invitations, of course, suggest that these

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"special" people

might enjoy summering with Montague at Hill House. Eleanor and Theo are the only two to

respond, each for her own reasons. Theo, who has demonstrated a fairly convincing ability

with the Rhine cards, is on the outs with her current lover (in the film, Theo-played by Claire

Bloom-is presented as a lesbian with a litch for Eleanor; in Jackson's novel there is the

barest whiff that Theo's sexual preferences may not be 100 percent AC).

But it is Eleanor, on whose house stones fell when she was a little girl, that the novel is

vitaly concerned with, and it is the character of Eleanor and Shirley Jackson's depiction of it

that elevates The Haunting of Hill House into the ranks of the great supernatural novelsindeed,

it seems to me that it and James's The Turn of the Screw are the only two great novels

of the supernatural in the last hundred years (although we might add two long

novellas:

Machen's "The Great God Pan" and Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness").

"Nearly all the characters of the new American gothic are narcissistic. . .

weaklings who try

to read their own preoccupations into reality."

Try this shoe on Eleanor, and we find it fits perfectly. She is obsessively

concerned with

herself, and in Hill House she finds a huge and monstrous mirror reflecting back her

own

distorted face. She is a woman who has been profoundly stunted by her upbringing and

her

family life. When we are inside her mind (which is almost constantly, with the

exception of the

first chapter and the last), we may find ourselves thinking of that old Oriental

custom of foot

binding-only it is not Eleanor's feet that have been bound; it is that part of her

mind where the

ability to live any sort of independent life must begin.

"It is true that Eleanor's characterization is one of the finest in Miss Jackson's

works,"

Lenemaja Friedman writes. "It is second only to that of Merricat in the later novel

We Have

Always Lived in the Castle. There are many facets to Eleanor's personality: she can

be gay,

charming, and witty when she feels wanted; she is generous and willing to give of

herself. At

the same time, she resents Theo's selfishness and is ready to accuse Theo of
trickery when

they discover the sign on the wall. For many years, Eleanor has been filled with
frustration and

hate: she has come to hate her mother and then finally her sister and brother-in-law
for taking

advantage of her more submissive and passive nature. She struggles to overcome the
guilt

she feels for the death of her mother.

"Although one comes to know her quite well, she remains mysterious. The mystery is a
product of Eleanor's uncertainty and her mental and emotional changes, which are
difficult to

fathom. She is insecure and, therefore, unstable in her relationships with others
and her

relationship to the house. She feels the irresistible force of the spirits and
longs, finally, to

submit to them. When she does decide not to leave Hill House, one must assume she is
slipping into madness." *

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Hill House, then, is the microcosm where universal forces collide, and in his piece
on The

Sundial (published in 1958, a year before The Haunting of Hill House), John G. Park
goes on

to speak of "the voyage . . . {the} attempt to flee . . . an attempt to escape . . .

cloying

authoritarianism . . .

This is, in fact, the place where Eleanor's own voyage begins, and also the motive

for that

voyage. She is shy, withdrawn, and submissive. The mother has died, and Eleanor has

judged

and found herself guilty of negligence-perhaps even murder. She has remained firmly

under

the thumb of her married sister following her mother's death, and early on

*Friedman,

Shirley Jackson, p. 133.

there's a bitter argument over whether Eleanor will be allowed to go to Hill House

at all. And

Eleanor, who is thirty-two, habitually claims to be two years older.

She does manage to get out, practically stealing the car which she has helped to

purchase.

The jailbreak is on, Eleanor's attempt to escape what Park calls "cloying

authoritarianism." The

journey will lead her to Hill House, and as Eleanor herself thinks-with a growing,

feverish

intensity as the story progresses-"journeys end in lovers meeting."

Her narcissism is perhaps most strikingly established by a fantasy she indulges in

while still

on the way to Hill House. She stops the car, full of "disbelief and wonder" at the

sight of a gate

flanked by ruined stone pillars in the middle of a long line of oleanders. Eleanor

recalls that

oleanders are poisonous . . . and then:

Will I, she thought, will I get out of my car and go between the ruined gates and

then,

once I am in the magic oleander square, find that I have wandered into a fairyland,

protected poisonously from the eyes of people passing? Once I have stepped between

the

magic gateposts, will I find myself through the protective barrier, the spell

broken? I will go

into a sweet garden, with fountains and low benches and roses trained over arbors,

and

find one path-jeweled, perhaps, with rubies and emeralds, soft enough for a king's

daughter to walk upon with her little sandaled feet-and it will lead me directly to

the palace

which lies under a spell. I will walk up low stone steps past stone lions guarding

and into a

courtyard where a fountain plays and the queen waits, weeping, for the princess to

return . .

. . And we shall live happily ever after.

The depth of this sudden fantasy is meant to startle us, and it does. It suggests a

personality

to which fantasizing has become a way of life . . . and what happens to Eleanor at

Hill House

comes uncomfortably close to fulfilling this strange fantasy-dream. Perhaps even the

happilyever-

after part, although I suspect Shirley Jackson would doubt that.

More than anything, the passage indicates the unsettling, perhaps mad depths of

Eleanor's

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narcissism-weird home movies play constantly inside her head, movies of which she is

the

star and the sole moving force-movies which are the exact opposite of her real life,

in fact.

Her imagination is restless, fertile . . . and perhaps dangerous. Later, the stone

lions she has

imagined in the passage quoted turn up as ornamental bookends in the totally

fictional

apartment she has imagined for Theo's benefit.

In Eleanor's life, that turning-inward which Park and Malin associate with the new

American

gothic is a constant thing. Shortly after the enchanted castle fantasy, Eleanor

stops for lunch

and overhears a mother explaining to a waitress why her little girl will not drink

her milk. "She

wants her cup of stars," the mother says. "It has stars in the bottom, and she

always drinks her

milk from it at home. She calls it her cup of stars because she can see the stars

while she

drinks her milk."

Eleanor immediately turns this into herself: "Indeed yes, Eleanor thought; indeed, so do I; a

cup of stars, of course." Like Narcissus himself, she is quite unable to deal with the outside

world in any other way than as a reflection of her inner world. The weather in both places is

always the same.

But leave Eleanor for the time being, making her way toward Hill House "which always waits

at the end of the day." We'll beat her there, if that's okay with you.

I said that The House Next Door forms a provenance in its entirety; the provenance of Hill

House is established in classic ghost-story fashion by Dr. Montague in just eleven pages. The

story is told (of course!) by the fire with drinks in hand. The salient points: Hill

House was built

by an unreconstructed Puritan named Hugh Crain. His young wife died moments before she

would have seen Hill House for the first time. His second wife died of a fall- cause unknown.

His two little girls remained in Hill House until the death of Crain's third wife (nothing there-that

wife died in Europe), and were then sent to a cousin. They spent the rest of their lives

quarreling over ownership of the mansion. Later, the older sister returns to Hill House with a

companion, a young girl from the village.

The companion becomes particularly important because it is in her that Hill House seems

most specifically to mirror Eleanor's own life. Eleanor too was a companion, during her

mother's long terminal illness. Following the death of old Miss Crain, there are stories of

neglect; "of a doctor called too late," Montague says, "of the old lady lying neglected upstairs

while the younger woman dallied in the garden with some village lout . . ."

More bitter feeling followed the death of the old Miss Crain. There was a court case over

ownership between the companion and the young Miss Crain. The companion finally wins

. . .

and shortly after commits suicide by hanging herself in the turret. Later tenants have been . . .

well, uncomfortable in Hill House. We have hints that some have been more than uncomfortable; that some of them may actually have fled from Hill House, screaming

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in terror.

"Essentially," Montague says, "the evil is in the house itself, I think. It has enchained and

destroyed its people and their lives, and it is a place of contained ill will." And the central

question that The Haunting of Hill House poses for the reader is whether or not Montague is right. He prefaces his story with several classical references to what we've been calling the Bad Place-the Hebraic for haunted, as in haunted house, tsaraas, meaning "leprous"; Homer's phrase for it, aidaio domos, meaning a house of Hades. "I need not remind you," Montague says, ". . . that the concept of certain houses as unclean or forbidden-perhaps sacred-is as old as the mind of man." As in The House Next Door, the one thing we can be sure of is that there are no actual ghosts in Hill House. None of the four characters come upon the shade of the companion flapping up the hall with a rope burn around her ectoplasmic neck. This is well enough, however-Montague himself says that in all the records of psychic phenomena, one cannot find any case where a ghost actually hurt a person. What they do if they are malign, he suggests, is work on the mind. One thing we do know about Hill House is that it is all wrong. It is no one thing we can put our finger on; it's everything. Stepping into Hill House is like stepping into the mind of a madman; it isn't long before you weird out yourself.

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests
evil

in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle,
some

chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair

The face of

Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of
glee

in the eyebrow of a cornice.

And even more chilling, more to the point:

Eleanor shook herself, turning to see the room complete. It had an unbelievably
faulty

design which left it chillingly wrong in all its dimensions, so that the walls
seemed always in

one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and in another direction
a fraction

less than the barest tolerable length; this is where they want me to sleep, Eleanor
thought

incredulously; what nightmares are waiting, shadowed, in those high corners-what
breath

of mindless fear will drift across my mouth . . . and shook herself again. Really,
she told

herself, really, Eleanor.

We see a horror story developing here that Lovecraft would have embraced
enthusiastically,

had he lived long enough to read it. It might even have taught the Old Providence

Spook a

thing or two. H.P.L. was struck by the horror of wrong geometry; he wrote frequently

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of

nonEuclidian angles that tortured the eye and hurt the mind, and suggested other

dimensions

where the sum of a triangle's three corners might equal more or less than 180° .

Contemplating

such things, he suggested, might be enough in itself to drive a man crazy. Nor was

he far

wrong; we know from various psychological experiments that when you tamper with a

man or

woman's perspective on their physical world, you tamper with what may actually be

the fulcrum

of the human mind.

Other writers have dealt with this fascinating idea of perspective gone haywire; my

own

favorite is Joseph Payne Brennan's short story "Canavan's Back Yard," where an

antiquarian

bookdealer discovers that his weedy, ordinary back yard is much longer than it

seems-it runs,

in fact, all the way to the portholes of hell. In Charles L. Grant's *The Hour of the*

Oxrun Dead,

one of the main characters discovers he can no longer find the borders of the town

where he

has lived all his life. We see him crawling along the verge of the highway, looking for the way

back in. Unsettling stuff.

But Jackson handled the concept better than anyone, I think-certainly better than Lovecraft, who understood it but apparently couldn't show it. Theo enters the bedroom she will

share with Eleanor looking incredulously at a stained-glass window, a decorative urn, the

pattern in the carpet. There is nothing wrong with these things taken one by one; it is just that

when we add up the perceptual equivalent of their angles, we come out with a triangle where

the sum of the corners equals a bit more (or a bit less) than 180°.

As Anne Rivers Siddons points out, everything in Hill House is skewed. There is nothing

which is perfectly straight or perfectly level-which may be why doors keep swinging open or

shut. And this idea of skew is important to Jackson's concept of the Bad Place because it

heightens those feelings of altered perception. Being in Hill House is like tripping on a low-watt

dosage of LSD, where everything seems strange and you feel you will begin to hallucinate at

any time. But you never quite do. You just look incredulously at a stained-glass

window . . . or

a decorative urn . . . or the pattern on the carpet. Being in Hill House is like

looking into one of

those trick rooms where folks look big at one end and small at the other. Being in

Hill House is

like lying in bed in the dark on the night you went three drinks beyond your

capacity . . . and

feeling the bed begin to spin slowly around and around

Jackson suggests (always in her low, insinuating voice-this, along with *The Turn of*

the

Screw, may very well be where Peter Straub got the idea that the horror story works

best when

it is "ambiguous and low-key and restrained") these things quietly and rationally;

she is never

strident. It is just, she says, that being in Hill House does something fundamental

and

unpleasant to the screen of perception. This is what, she suggests, being in

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telepathic contact

with a lunatic would be like.

Hill House is evil; we'll accept Montague's postulate. But how responsible is Hill

House for

the phenomena which follow? There are knockings in the night-huge thunderings,

rather,

which terrify both Theo and Eleanor. Luke and Professor Montague attempt to track

down a

barking dog and get lost within a stone's throw of the house-shades of Canavan the bookdealer (Brennan's story predates *The Haunting of Hill House*) and Charles Grant's strange

little town of Oxrun, Connecticut. Theo's clothes are splattered with some foul red substance

("red paint," Eleanor says . . . but her terror suggests a more sinister substance)

that later

disappears. And written in the same red substance, first in the hall and then over the wardrobe

where the ruined clothes have been hung are these words: COME HOME, ELEANOR . . . HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR.

Here, in this writing, is where the lives of Eleanor and of this evil house, this

Bad Place,

become inextricably entwined. The house has singled her out. The house has chosen her . . .

or is it the other way around? Either way, Eleanor's idea that "journeys end in lovers meeting"

becomes ever more ominous.

Theo, who has some telepathic ability, begins to suspect more and more that Eleanor herself is responsible for most of the manifestations. A kind of low-key tension has built up

between the two women, ostensibly over Luke, with whom Eleanor has begun to fall in love,

but it probably springs more deeply from Theo's intuition that not everything which

is

happening in Hill House is of Hill House.

We know there has been an incident of telekinesis in Eleanor's past; at the age of twelve,

stones fell from the ceilings "and pattered madly on the roof." She denies-hysterically

denies-that she had anything at all to do with the incident of the stones, focusing instead on

the embarrassment it caused her, the unwanted (she says it was unwanted, anyway) attention

that it brought upon her. Her denials have an odd effect upon the reader, one of increasing

weight in light of the fact that most of the afferent phenomena which the four of them

experience in Hill House could be ascribed either to poltergeists or to telekinetic phenomena.

"They never even told me what was going on," Eleanor says urgently even after the conversation has moved on from the episode of the stones-no one is even really listening to

her, but in the closed circle of her own narcissistic world, it seems to her that this strange,

long-ago phenomenon must be all they can think of (as it is all she can think of the outer

weather must reflect the inner weather). "My mother said it was the neighbors, they were

always against us because she wouldn't mix with them. My mother-"

Luke interrupts her to say, "I think all we want here is the facts." But for

Eleanor, the facts of

her own life are all she can cope with.

How responsible is Eleanor for the tragedy which ensues? Let's look again at the

peculiar

words the ghost-busters find written in the hall: HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR.

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The Haunting of Hill House; submerged as it is in the twin ambiguities of Eleanor's

personality

and those of Hill House itself, becomes a novel that can be read in many different

ways, a

novel which suggests almost endless paths and a wide range of conclusions. HELP

ELEANOR, for instance. If Eleanor herself is responsible for the writing, is she

asking for help?

If the house is responsible, is it asking her for help? Is Eleanor creating the

ghost of her own

mother? Is it mother who is calling for help? Or has Hill House probed Eleanor's

mind and

written something which will play on her gnawing sense of guilt? That long-ago

companion

whom Eleanor so resembles hung herself after the house became hers, and guilt may

well

have been her motive. Is the house trying to do the same to Eleanor? In The House

Next Door,

this is exactly how the contemporary Kim Dougherty has built works on the minds of
its

tenants-probing for the weak points and preying on them. Hill House may be doing
this alone

. . . it may be doing it with Eleanor's help . . . or Eleanor may be doing it alone.

The book is

subtle, and the reader is left in large part to work these questions out to his or
her own

satisfaction.

What about the rest of the phrase-COME HOME ELEANOR? Again we may hear the voice
of Eleanor's dead mother in this imperative, or the voice of her own central self,
crying out

against this new independence, this attempt to escape Park's "cloying
authoritarianism" and

into an exhilarating but existentially scary state of personal freedom. I see this
as the most

logical possibility. As Merricat tells us in Jackson's final novel that "we have
always lived in the

castle," so Eleanor Vance has always lived in her own closed and suffocating world.

It is not

Hill House which frightens her, we feel; Hill House is another closed and
suffocating world,

walled in, cupped by hills, secure behind locked gates when the dark of night has
fallen. The

real threat she seems to feel comes from Montague, even more from Luke, and most of
all

from Theo. "You've got foolishness and wickedness all mixed up," Theo tells Eleanor
after

Eleanor has voiced her unease at painting her toenails red like Theo's. She simply
tosses the

line off, but such an idea strikes very close to the basis of Eleanor's most closely
held life

concepts. These people pose to Eleanor the possibility of another way of life, one
which is

largely antiauthoritarian and antinarcissistic. Eleanor is attracted and yet
repelled by the

prospect-this is a woman who, at thirty -two, feels daring when buying two pairs of
slacks,

after all. And it is not very daring of me to suggest that COME HOME ELEANOR is an
imperative Eleanor has delivered to herself; that she is Narcissus unable to leave
the pool.

There is a third implication here, however, one which I find almost too horrifying
to

contemplate, and it is central to my own belief that this is one of the finest books
ever to come

out of the genre. Quite simply stated, COME HOME ELEANOR may be Hill House's

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invitation

for Eleanor to join it. Journeys end in lovers meeting is Eleanor's phrase for it,

and as her end

approaches, this old children's rime occurs to her:

Go in and out the windows,

Go in and out the windows,

Go in and out the windows,

As we have done before.

Go forth and face your lover,

Go forth and face your lover,

Go forth and face your lover,

As we have done before.

Either way-Hill House or Eleanor as the central cause of the haunting-the ideas Park
and

Malin set forth hold up. Either Eleanor has succeeded, through her telekinetic
ability, in turning

Hill House into a giant mirror reflecting her own subconscious, or Hill House is a
chameleon,

able to convince her that she had finally found her place, her own cup of stars
caught in these
brooding hills.

I believe that Shirley Jackson would like us to come away from her novel with the
ultimate

belief that it was Hill House all along. That first paragraph suggests "outside
evil" very

strongly-a primitive force like that which inhabits Anne River Siddons's house next
door, a

force which is divorced from humankind. In Eleanor's end we may feel that there are
three

layers of "truth" here: Eleanor's belief that the house is haunted; Eleanor's belief that the house is her place, that it has just been waiting for someone like her; Eleanor's final realization that she has been used by a monstrous organism-that she has, in fact, been manipulated on the subconscious level into believing that she has been pulling the strings. But it has all been done with mirrors, as the magicians say, and poor Eleanor is murdered by the ultimate falsehood of her own reflection in the brick and stone and glass of Hill House:

I am really doing it, she thought, turning the wheel to send the car directly at the great tree at the curve of the driveway. I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last: this is me. I am really really really doing it by myself.

In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled into the tree, she thought clearly,

Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?

"I am doing this all by myself now, at last: this is me," Eleanor thinks-but of course it is impossible for her to believe otherwise in the context of the new American gothic.

Her last thought before her death is not of Hill House, but of herself.

The novel ends with a reprise of the first paragraph, closing the loop and

completing the

circuit . . . and leaving us with an unpleasant surmise: if Hill House was not

haunted before, it

certainly is now. Jackson finishes by telling us that whatever walked in Hill House

walked

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alone.

For Eleanor Vance, that would be business as usual.

4

A novel that makes a neat bridge away from the Bad Place (and perhaps it's time we

got

away from these haunted houses before we come down with a terminal case of the

creeps) is

Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967). I used to be fond of telling people, at the time

Roman

Polanski's film version came out, that it was one of those rare cases where if you

had read the

book you didn't have to see the movie, and if you had seen the movie, you didn't

have to read

the book.

That is not really the truth (it never is), but Polanski's film version is

remarkably true to

Levin's novel, and both men seem to share an ironic turn of humor. I don't believe

anyone else

could have made Levin's remarkable little novel quite so well . . . and by the way,

while it is
remarkable for Hollywood to remain so faithful to a novel (one sometimes thinks that
major
movie companies pay staggering sums for books just so they can tell their authors
all the parts
of them that don't work-surely some of the most expensive ego-tripping in the
history of
American arts and letters), it is not remarkable in Levin's case. Every novel he has
was ever
written* has been a marvel of plotting. He is the Swiss watchmaker of the suspense
novel; in
terms of plot, he makes what the rest of us do look like those five-dollar watches
you can buy
in the discount drugstores. This fact alone has made Levin almost invulnerable to
the
depredations of the story-changers, those subvertors who are more concerned with
visual
effect than with a coherent storyline. Levin's books are constructed as neatly as an
elegant
house of cards; pull one plot twist, and everything comes tumbling down. As a
result,
moviemakers have been pretty much forced to show us what Levin built.
About the film Levin himself says, "I've always felt that the film of Rosemary's
Baby is the
single most faithful adaptation of a novel ever to come out of Hollywood. Not only

does it

incorporate whole chunks of the book's dialogue, it even follows the colors of clothing (where I mentioned them) and the layout of the apartment. And perhaps more importantly, Polanski's directorial style of not aiming the camera squarely at the horror but rather letting the audience spot it for themselves off at the side of the screen coincides happily, I think, with my own writing style.

"There was a reason for his fidelity to the book, incidentally . . . His screenplay was the first adaptation he had written of someone else's material; his earlier films had all been originals. I think he didn't know it was permitted-nay, almost mandatory-to make changes. I remember him calling me from Hollywood to ask in which issue of the New Yorker Guy had seen the shirt

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danse macabre Stephen King advertised. To my chagrin I had to admit I'd faked it; I had assumed any issue of the New Yorker would have a handsome shirt advertised in it. But the correct issue for the time of the scene didn't."

Levin has written two horror novels-Rosemary's Baby and The Stepford Wives-and

while

both shine with the exquisite plotting that is Levin's trademark, probably neither

is quite as

effective as his first book, which is unfortunately not much read these days. A Kiss

Before

Dying is a gritty suspense story told with great élan-rarity enough, but what is

even more rare

is that the book (written while Levin was in his early twenties) contains surprises

which really

surprise . . . and it is rela-

*In case you're one of the five or six readers of popular fiction in America who has

missed them, they are A

Kiss Before Dying, Rosemary's Baby, This Perfect Day, The Stepford Wives, and The

Boys from Brazil. He has

written two Broadway plays, Veronica's Room and the immensely successful Deathtrap.

Less known is a modest

but chillingly effective made-for-TV movie called Dr. Cook's Garden, starring Bing

Crosby in a wonderfully adroit

performance.

tively impervious to that awful, dreadful goblin of a reader, he or she WHO TURNS TO

THE

LAST THREE PAGES TO SEE HOW IT CAME OUT.

Do you do this nasty, unworthy trick? Yes, you! I'm talking to you! Don't slink away

and grin

into your hand! Own up to it! Have you ever stood in a bookshop, glanced furtively

around, and

turned to the end of an Agatha Christie to see who did it, and how? Have you ever

turned to

the end of a horror novel to see if the hero made it out of the darkness and into

the light? If you

have ever done this, I have three simple words which I feel it is my duty to convey:

SHAME ON

YOU! It is low to mark your place in a book by folding down the corner of the page

where you

left Off; TURNING TO THE END TO SEE HOW IT CAME OUT is even lower. If you have this

habit, I urge you to break it . . . break it at once! *

Well, enough of this digression. All I intended to say about A Kiss Before Dying is

that the

book's biggest surprise-the real screeching bombshell-is neatly tucked away about

one

hundred pages into the story. If you should happen upon this moment while thumbing

randomly through the book, it means nothing to you. If you have read everything

faithfully up to

that point, it means . . . everything. The only other writer I can think of offhand

who had that

wonderful ability to totally ambush the reader was the late Cornell Woolrich (who

also wrote

under the name of William Irish), but Woolrich did not have Levin's dry wit. Levin

speaks

affectionately of Woolrich as an influence on his own career, mentioning Phantom

Lady and

The Bride Wore Black as particular favorites.

Levin's wit is probably a better place to start with *Rosemary's Baby* than his

ability to plot a

story. His output of novels has been relatively small-it averages out to one every

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five years or

so-but it's interesting to note that one of the five, *The Stepford Wives*, works best

as outright

satire (William Goldman, the novelist-screenwriter who adapted that book for the

screen, knew

it; you will remember that earlier on we mentioned "Oh Frank, you're the best,

you're the

champ"), almost as farce, and *Rosemary's Baby* is a kind of socioreligious satire. We

might

also mention *The Boys from Brazil*, Levin's most recent novel, when we speak of his

wit. The

title itself is a pun, and although the book deals (even if only peripherally) with

subjects such as

the German death

*I have always wanted to publish a novel with the last thirty pages simply left out.

The reader would be mailed

these final pages by the publisher upon receipt of a satisfactory summary of

everything that had happened in the

story up to that point. That would certainly put a spoke in the wheels of those

people who TURN TO THE END TO

SEE HOW IT CAME OUT.

camp and the so-called "scientific experiments" that were carried out there (some of the

"scientific experiments," we will recall, included trying to impregnate women with the sperm of

dogs and administering lethal doses of poison to identical twins in order to see if they would

expire in a similar span of time), it vibrates with its own nervous wit and seems to parody those

Martin-Bormann-is-alive-and-well-and-living-in-Paraguay books that are apparently going to be

with us even unto the end of the world.

I am not suggesting that Ira Levin is either Jackie Vernon or George Orwell masquerading in

a fright wig-nothing so simple or simplistic. I am suggesting that the books he has written

achieve suspense without turning into humorless thudding tracts (two novels of the Humorless,

Thudding Tract School of horror writing are *Damon*, by C. Terry Cline, and *The Exorcist*, by

William Peter Blatty-Cline has since improved as a writer, and Blatty has fallen silent . . .

forever, if we are lucky).

Levin is one of the few writers who has returned more than once to the field of horror and

the supernatural and who seems unafraid of the fact that much of the material the genre deals

with is utterly foolish-and at that, he has done better than many critics, who visit the genre the

way rich white ladies once visited the children of New England factory slaves on Thanksgiving

with food baskets and on Easter with chocolate eggs and bunnies. These slumming critics,

unaware both of their own infuriating elitism and their total ignorance of what popular fiction

does and what it is about, are able to see the foolishness spawned as a by-product of the

bubbling potions, the pointy black hats, and all the other clanking huggermugger trappings of

the supernatural tale, but are unable to see-or refuse to see-the strong and universal

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archetypes that underlie the best of them.

The foolishness is there, all right; this is Rosemary's first look at the child she has given birth

to:

His eyes were golden-yellow, all golden-yellow, with neither whites nor irises; all golden-yellow, with vertical black-slit pupils.

She looked at him.

He looked at her, golden-yellowly, and then at the swaying upside-down crucifix.

She looked at them watching her and knife-in-hand screamed at them, "What have you done to his eyes?"

They stirred and looked to Roman.

"He has His Father's eyes," he said.

We have lived and suffered with Rosemary Woodhouse for two hundred and nine pages up to this point, and Roman Castevet's response to her question seems almost like the punchline

of a long, involved shaggydog story-one of the ones that ends with something like,

"My, that's

a long way to tip a Rari," or "Rudolph the Red knows rain, dear." Besides yellow eyes,

Rosemary's baby turns out to have claws ("They're very nice," Roman tells Rosemary,

". . .

very tiny and pearly. The mitts are only so He doesn't scratch Himself . . ."), and

a tail, and the

buds of horns. While I was teaching the book at the University of Maine to an

undergraduate

class entitled Themes in Horror and the Supernatural, one of my students mused that

ten

years later Rosemary's baby would be the only kid on his Little League team who

needed a

custom-tailored baseball cap.

Basically, Rosemary has given birth to the comic-book version of Satan, the L'il Imp

we were

all familiar with as children and who sometimes put in an appearance in the motion

picture

cartoons, arguing with a L'il Angel over the main character's head. Levin broadens

the satire

by giving us a Satanist coven comprised almost entirely of old people; they argue

constantly in

their waspy voices about how the baby should be cared for. The fact that

Laura-Louise and

Minnie Castevet are much too old to care for a baby somehow adds the final macabre

touch,

and Rosemary's first tentative bonding to her baby comes when she tells LauraLouise

that she

is rocking "Andy" much too fast, and that the wheels of his bassinette need to be

oiled.

Levin's accomplishment is that such satire does not deflate the horror of his story

but

actually enhances it. Rosemary's Baby is a splendid confirmation of the idea that

humor and

horror lie side by side, and that to deny one is to deny the other. It is a fact

Joseph Heller

makes splendid use of in Catch-22 and which Stanley Elkin used in The Living End

(which

might have been subtitled "Job in the Afterlife").

Besides satire, Levin laces his novel with veins of irony ("It's good for your

blood, dearie,"

the Old Witch in the E.C. comics used to say). Early on, the Castevets invite Guy

and

Rosemary over for dinner; Rosemary accepts, on the condition that it won't be too much

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trouble.

"Honey, if it was trouble I wouldn't ask you," Mrs. Castevet said. "Believe me, I'm as

selfish as the day is long."

Rosemary smiled. "That isn't what Terry told me," she said.

"Well," Mrs. Castevet said with a pleased smile, "Terry didn't know what she was talking about."

The irony is that everything Minnie Castevet says here is the literal truth; she really is as

selfish as the day is long, and Terry—who ends up either being murdered or committing

suicide when she discovers that she is to be or has been used as an incubator for Satan's

child—really didn't know what she was talking about. But she found out. Oh yes.

Heh-heh-heh.

My wife, raised in the Catholic church, claims that the book is also a religious comedy with

its own shaggy-dog punchline. Rosemary's Baby, she claims, only proves what the Catholic

church has said about mixed marriages all along—they just don't work. This

particular bit of

comedy grows richer, perhaps, when we add the fact of Levin's own Jewishness against

the

Christian backdrop of custom used by the Satanist coven. Seen in this light, the

book becomes

a kind of you-don't-have-to-be-Jewish-to-love-Levin's view of the battle of good and

evil.

Before leaving the idea of religion and talking a bit about the feelings of paranoia

which

really seem to lie central to the book, let me suggest that while Levin's tongue is

in his cheek

part of the time, that is no reason for us to expect it to be there all of the time.

Rosemary's

Baby was written and published at the time the God-is-dead tempest was whirling

around in

the teapot of the sixties, and the book deals with questions of faith in an

unpretentious but

thoughtful and intriguing way.

We might say that the major theme of Rosemary's Baby deals with urban paranoia (as

opposed to the small-town or rural paranoia we will see in Jack Finney's *The Body*

Snatchers),

but that an important minor theme could be stated along these lines: The weakening

of

religious conviction is an opening wedge for the devil, both in the macrocosm

(questions of

world faith) and in the microcosm (the cycle of Rosemary's faith as she goes from belief as

Rosemary Reilly, to unbelief as Rosemary Woodhouse, to belief again as the mother of her

infernal Child). I'm not suggesting that Ira Levin believes this Puritanical thesis-although he

may, for all I know. I am suggesting, however, that it makes a nice fulcrum on which to turn his

plot, and that he plays fair with the idea and explores most of its implications. In the religious

pilgrim's progress that Rosemary goes through, Levin gives us a seriocomic allegory of faith.

Rosemary and Guy begin as typical young marrieds; Rosemary is practicing birth control as

a matter of course in spite of her rigid Catholic upbringing, and both of them have decided they

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will have children only when they-not God-decide they are ready. After Terry's suicide (or

was it murder?), Rosemary has a dream in which she is being scolded by an old parochial

school teacher, Sister Agnes, for bricking up the school windows and getting them disqualified

from a beautiful-school contest. But mingling with the dream are real voices from the Castevet

apartment next door, and it is Minnie Castevet, speaking through the mouth of Sister Agnes in

Rosemary's dream, that we are listening to:

"Anybody! Anybody!" Sister Agnes said. "All she has to be is young, healthy, and not a

virgin. She doesn't have to be a no-good drug-addict whore out of the gutter. Didn't I say

that in the beginning? Anybody. As long as she's young and healthy and not a virgin."

This dream sequence does several useful things. It amuses us in a nervous, edgy sort of

way; it lets us in on the fact that the Castevets were in some way involved in the death of

Terry; it allows us to see shoaling waters ahead for Rosemary. Perhaps this is stuff that only

interests another writer-it's more like two mechanics inspecting a nifty four-barrel carburetor

than it is like classical analysis-but Levin does his job so unobtrusively that maybe it doesn't

hurt for me to take the pointer and say, "Here! This is where he's starting to get close to you;

this is the point of entry, and now he will begin working inward toward your heart."

Yet the most significant thing about the passage is that Rosemary has woven a dream of

Catholic intent around the words her lightly sleeping mind has overheard. She casts

Minnie

Castevet as a nun . . . and so she is, although she is a nun of a rather blacker persuasion than

that longago Sister Agnes. My wife also says that one of the basic tenets of the Catholic

church she grew up with was, "Give us your children and they will be ours forever."

The shoe

fits here, and Rosemary wears it. And ironically enough, it is the superficial weakening of her

faith which allows the devil a doorway into her life . . . but it is the immutable bedrock of that

same faith that allows her to accept "Andy," horns and all.

This is Levin's handling of religious views in the microcosm-on the surface,

Rosemary is a

typical young modern who could have stepped whole and breathing from Wallace Stevens's

poem "Sunday Morning"-the churchbells mean nothing to her as she sits peeling her oranges. But beneath, that parochial schoolgirl Rosemary Reilly is very much there.

His handling of the macrocosm is similar-just bigger.

At the dinner party the Castevets have for the Woodhouses, conversation turns to the impending visit of the Pope to New York. "I tried to keep [the book's] unbelievabilities

believable," Levin remarks, "by incorporating bits of `real life' happenings along the way. I kept

stacks of newspapers, and writing about a month or two after the fact, worked in events such

as the transit strike and Lindsay's election as mayor. When, having decided for obvious

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reasons that the baby should be born on June 25th, I checked back to see what had been

happening on the night Rosemary would have to conceive, you know what I found: the Pope's

visit, and the Mass on television. Talk about serendipity! From then on I felt the book was

Meant To Be."

The conversation between Guy Woodhouse and the Casteveys concerning the Pope seems predictable, even banal, but it expresses the very view which Levin gently suggests is

responsible for the whole thing:

"I heard on TV that he's going to postpone and wait until (the newspaper strike) is over,"

Mrs. Castevet said.

Guy smiled. "Well," he said, "that's show biz."

Mr. and Mrs. Castevet laughed, and Guy along with them. Rosemary smiled and cut her steak

Still laughing, Mr. Castevet said, "It is, you know: That's just what it is: show biz!"

"You can say that again," Guy said.

"The costumes, the rituals," Mr. Castevet said; "every religion, not only

Catholicism.

Pageants for the ignorant."

Mrs. Castevet said, "I think we're offending Rosemary."

"No, not at all," Rosemary said.

"You aren't religious, my dear, are you?" Mr. Castevet asked.

"I was brought up to be," Rosemary said, "but now I'm an agnostic. I wasn't offended.

Really I wasn't."

We don't doubt the truth of Rosemary Woodhouse's statement, but underneath that surface

there is a little parochial schoolgirl named Rosemary Reilly who is very offended, and who

probably regards such talk as blasphemy.

The Castevets are conducting a bizarre sort of job interview here, testing Rosemary and

Guy for the depth and direction of their commitments and beliefs; they are revealing their own

contempt for the church and things sacred; but, Levin suggests, they are also expressing

views which are commonly held . . . and not just by Satanists.

Yet faith must exist beneath, he suggests; it is the surface weakening that allows the devil

in, but beneath, even the Castevets are in vital need of Christianity, because without the

sacred there is no profane. The Castevets seem to sense Rosemary Reilly existing beneath

Rosemary Woodhouse, and it is her husband, Guy, an authentic pagan, that they use as
a

go-between. And Guy lowers himself admirably to the occasion.

We are not allowed to doubt that it is the softening of Rosemary's faith that has
given the

devil a door into her life. Her sister Margaret, a good Catholic, calls Rosemary
long distance

not long after the Casteverts' plot has begun to move. "I've had the funniest feeling
all day long,

Rosemary. That something happened to you. Like an accident or something."

Rosemary isn't favored with such a premonition (the closest she gets is her dream of
Sister

Agnes speaking in Minnie Castevet's voice) because she isn't worthy of it. Good
Catholics,

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Levin says-and we may not sense his tongue creeping back into his cheek-get the good
premonitions.

The religious motif stretches through the book, and Levin does some clever things
with it,

but perhaps we could close off our discussion of it with some thoughts about

Rosemary's

remarkable "conception dream." First, it is significant that the time chosen for the
devil to

impregnate Rosemary coincides with the Pope's visit. Rosemary's mousse is drugged,

but she

eats only a little of it. As a result, she has a dreamlike memory of her sexual

encounter with the

devil, but it is one her subconscious couches in symbolic terms. Reality flickers in

and out as

Guy prepares her for her confrontation with Satan.

In her dream, Rosemary finds herself on a yacht with the assassinated President

Kennedy.

Jackie Kennedy, Pat Lawford, and Sarah Churchill are also in attendance. Rosemary

asks JFK

if her good friend Hutch (who becomes Rosemary's protector until he is struck down

by the

coven; he is the one who warns Rosemary and Guy early on that the Bramford is a Bad

Place)

is coming; Kennedy smiles and tells her the cruise is "for Catholics only." This is

one

qualification Minnie has not mentioned earlier, but it helps confirm the idea that

the person the

coven is really interested in is Rosemary Reilly. Again, it seems to be the

blasphemy that they

are mostly concerned with; the spiritual lineage of Christ must be perverted to

allow them to

accomplish a successful birth.

Guy removes Rosemary's wedding ring, symbolically ending their marriage, but also

becoming a kind of best-man-in-reverse; Rosemary's friend Hutch comes with weather

warnings (and what is a hutch anyway but a safe place for rabbits?). During

intercourse, Guy

actually becomes the devil, and closing the dream out we see Terry again, this time

not as a

failed bride of Satan but as a sacrificial opener of the way.

In less expert hands such a dream scene might have become tiresome and didactic, but

Levin carries it off lightly and quickly, compressing the entire sequence into just

five pages.

But the strongest watchspring of *Rosemary's Baby* isn't the religious subtheme but

the

book's use of urban paranoia. The conflict between Rosemary Reilly and Rosemary

Woodhouse enriches the story, but if the book achieves horror-and I think it does-it

does so

because Levin is able to play upon these innate feelings of paranoia so skillfully.

Horror is a groping for pressure points, and where are we any more vulnerable than

in our

feelings of paranoia? In many ways, *Rosemary's Baby* is like a sinister Woody Allen

film, and

the Woodhouse/ Reilly dichotomy is useful here, too. Besides being a Catholic

forever beneath

her agnostic veneer, Rosemary is, beneath her carefully acquired cosmopolitan

varnish, a

small-town girl . . . and you can take the girl out of the country, but et cetera,

et cetera.

There is a saying-and I would be happy to attribute it if I could remember who to

attribute it

to-that perfect paranoia is perfect awareness. In a crazy sort of way, Rosemary's story is of a

coming to that sort of awareness. We become paranoid before she does (Minnie, for instance,

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being purposely slow with the dishes so Roman can talk to Guy-or make him a pitch-in the

other room), but following her dreamlike encounter with the devil and her subsequent pregnancy, her own paranoia follows along. When she wakes up the next morning, she finds

scratches-as if from claws-all over her body. "Don't yell," Guy says, showing her his

fingernails; "I already filed them down."

Before long, Minnie and Roman have begun a campaign to get Rosemary to use their obstetrician-the famous Abe Sapirstein-instead of the young guy she had been going to.

Don't do that, Rosemary, we want to tell her; he's one of them.

Modern psychiatry teaches that there is no difference between us and the paranoid-schizophrenic in Bedlam except that we somehow manage to keep our crazier suspicions under control while theirs have slipped their tethers; a story like

Rosemary's Baby

or Finney's The Body Snatchers seems to confirm the idea. We have discussed the horror

story as a tale which derives its effect from our terror of things which depart the norm; we have

looked at it as a taboo land which we enter with fear and trembling, and also as a
Dionysian
force which may invade our comfy Apollonian status quo without warning. Maybe all
horror
stories are really about disorder and the fear of change, and in Rosemary's Baby we
have the
feeling that everything is beginning to bulge at once-we can't see all the changes,
but we
sense them. Our dread for Rosemary springs from the fact that she seems the only
normal
person in a whole city of dangerous maniacs.
Before we have reached the midpoint of Levin's tale, we suspect everybody-and in
nine
cases out of ten we have been right to do so. We are allowed to indulge our paranoia
on
Rosemary's behalf to the utmost, and all our nightmares come true. On my first
reading of the
book, I remember even suspecting Dr. Hill, the nice young obstetrician Rosemary has
given up
in favor of Dr. Sapirstein. Of course, Hill is not a Satanist . . . he just gives
Rosemary back to
them when she comes to him for protection.
If horror novels do serve as catharsis for more mundane fears, then Levin's
Rosemary's
Baby seems to reflect back and effectively use the city dweller's very real feelings

of urban

paranoia. In this book there really are no nice people next door, and the worst things you ever

imagined about that dotty old lady down in 9-B turn out to be true. The real victory of the book

is that it allows us to be crazy for a while.

5

From urban paranoia to small-town paranoia: Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers*. *

Finney

himself has the following things to say about his book which was originally published as a Dell

paperback original in 1955:

"The book . . . was written in the early 1950s, and I don't really remember a lot about it. I do

recall that I simply felt in the mood to write something about a strange event or a series of

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them in a small town; something inexplicable. And that my first thought was that a dog would

be injured or killed by a car, and it would be discovered that a part of the animal's skeleton was

of stainless steel; bone and steel intermingled, that is, a thread of steel running into bone and

bone into steel so that it was clear the two had grown together. But this idea led to nothing in

my mind I remember that I wrote the first chapter pretty much as it appeared,
if I am
recalling correctly-in which people complained that someone close to them was in
actuality
an imposter. But I didn't know where this was to lead, either. However, during the
*As previously noted, the late-seventies remake of the Finney novel resets the story
in San Francisco, opting
for an urban paranoia which results in a number of sequences strikingly like those
which open Polanski's film
version of Rosemary's Baby. But Philip Kaufman lost more than he gained, I think, by
taking Finney's story out of
its natural small-town-with-a-bandstand-in-the-park setting.
course of fooling around with this, trying to make it work out, I came across a
reputable
scientific theory that objects might in fact be pushed through space by the pressure
of light,
and that dormant life of some sort might conceivably drift through space . . . and
[this]
eventually worked the book out.
"I was never satisfied with my own explanation of how these dry leaflike objects
came to
resemble the people they imitated; it seemed, and seems, weak, but it was the best I
could do.
"I have read explanations of the 'meaning' of this story, which amuse me, because
there is

no meaning at all; it was just a story meant to entertain, and with no more meaning than that.

The first movie version of the book followed the book with great faithfulness, except for the foolish ending; and I've always been amused by the contentions of people connected with the picture that they had a message of some sort in mind. If so, it's a lot more than I ever did, and since they followed my story very closely, it's hard to see how this message crept in. And when the message has been defined, it has always sounded a little simpleminded to me. The idea of writing a whole book in order to say that it's not really a good thing for us all to be alike, and that individuality is a good thing, makes me laugh."

Nevertheless, Jack Finney has written a great deal of fiction about the idea that individuality is a good thing and that conformity can start to get pretty scary after it passes a certain point.

His comments (in a letter to me dated December 24, 1979) about the first film version of *The Body Snatchers* raised a grin on my own face as well. As Pauline Kael, Penelope Gilliatt, and all of those sobersided film critics so often prove, no one is so humorless as a big-time film critic or so apt to read deep meanings into simple doings ("In *The Fury*," Pauline

Kael intoned,

apparently in all seriousness, "Brian De Palma has found the junk heart of

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America.")-it is as

if these critics feel it necessary to prove and re-prove their own literary; they

are like teenage

boys who feel obliged to demonstrate and redemonstrate their macho . . . perhaps

most of all

to themselves. This may be because they are working on the fringes of a field which

deals

entirely with pictures and the spoken word; they must surely be aware that while it

requires at

least a high-school education to understand and appreciate all the facets of even

such an

accessible book as *The Body Snatchers*, any illiterate with four dollars in his or

her pocket can

go to a movie and find the junk heart of America. Movies are merely picture books

that talk,

and this seems to have left many literate movie critics with acute feelings of

inferiority.

Filmmakers themselves are often happy to participate in this grotesque critical

overkill, and I

applauded Sam Peckinpah in my heart when he made this laconic reply to a critic who

asked

him why he had really made such a violent picture as *The Wild Bunch*: "I like shoot-em-ups."

Or so he was reputed to have said, and if it ain't true, gang, it oughtta be.

The Don Siegel version of *The Body Snatchers* is an amusing case where the film critics

tried to have it both ways. They began by saying that both Finney's novel and Siegel's film

were allegories about the witch-hunt atmosphere that accompanied the McCarthy hearings.

Then Siegel himself spoke up and said that his film was really about the Red Menace.

He did

not go so far as to say that there was a Commie under every American's bed, but there can be

little doubt that Siegel at least believed he was making a movie about a creeping fifth column.

It is the ultimate in paranoia, we might say: they're out there and they look just like us!

In the end it's Finney who comes away sounding the most right; *The Body Snatchers* is just

a good story, one to be read and savored for its own unique satisfactions. In the quarter-century since its original publication as a humble paperback original (a shorter version

appeared in *Collier's*, one of those good old magazines that fell by the wayside in order to

make space on the newstands of America for such intellectual publications as *Hustler*, *Screw*,

and Big Butts), the book has been rarely out of print. It reached its nadir as a Fotonovel in the wake of the Philip Kaufman remake; if there is a lower, slimier, more antibook concept than the Fotonovel, I don't know what it would be. I think I'd rather see my kids reading a stack of Beeline Books than one of those photocomics. It reached its apogee as a Gregg Press hardcover in 1976. Gregg Press is a small company which has re-issued some fifty or sixty science fiction and fantasy books-novels, collections, and anthologies-originally published as paperbacks, in hardcover. The editors of the Gregg series (David Hartwell and L. W. Currey) have chosen wisely and well, and in the library of any reader who cares honestly about science fiction-and about books themselves as lovely

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danse macabre Stephen King artifacts-you're apt to find one or more of these distinctive green volumes with the red-gold stamping on the spines. Oh dear God, we're off on another tangent. Well, never mind; I believe that what I started to say was simply that I think Finney's contention that The Body Snatchers is just a story is both

right and wrong. My own belief about fiction, long and deeply held, is that story must be paramount over all other considerations in fiction; that story defines fiction, and that all other considerations-theme, mood, tone, symbol, style, even characterization-are expendable.

There are critics who take the strongest possible exception to this view of fiction, and I really believe that they are the critics who would feel vastly more comfortable if Moby-Dick were a doctoral thesis on cetology rather than an account of what happened on the Pequod's final voyage. A doctoral thesis is what a million student papers have reduced this tale to, but the story still remains-"This is what happened to Ishmael." As story still remains in Macbeth, The Faerie Queen, Pride and Prejudice, Jude the Obscure, The Great Gatsby . . . and Jack Finney's The Body Snatchers. And story, thank God, after a certain point becomes irreducible, mysterious, impervious to analysis. You will find no English master's thesis in any college library titled "The Story-Elements of Melville's Moby Dick." And if you do find such a thesis, send it to me. I'll eat it. With A-1 Steak Sauce.

All very fine. And yet I don't think Finney would argue with the idea that story values are

determined by the mind through which they are filtered, and that the mind of any writer is a product of his outer world and inner temper. It is just the fact of this filter that has set the table for all those would-be English M.A.'s, and I certainly would not want you to think that I begrudge them their degrees-God knows that as an English major I slung enough bullshit to fertilize most of east Texas-but a great number of the people who are sitting at the long and groaning table of Graduate Studies in English are cutting a lot of invisible steaks and roasts . . . not to mention trading the Emperor's new clothes briskly back and forth in what may be the largest academic yard sale the world has ever seen.

Still, what we have here is a Jack Finney novel, and we can say certain things about it simply because it is a Jack Finney novel. First, we can say that it will be grounded in absolute reality-a prosy reality that is almost humdrum, at least to begin with. When we first meet the book's hero (and here I think Finney probably would object if I used the more formal word protagonist . . . so I won't), Dr. Miles Bennell, he is letting his last patient of the day out; a

sprained thumb. Becky Driscoll enters-and how is that for the perfect all-American name?-

with the first off-key note: her cousin Wilma has somehow gotten the idea that her Uncle Ira

really isn't her uncle anymore. But this note is faint and barely audible under the simple

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melodies of small-town life that Finney plays so well in the book's opening chapters

. . . and

Finney's rendering of the small-town archetype in this book may be the best to come out of the

1950s

The keynote that Finney sounds again and again in these first few chapters is so low-key

pleasant that in less sure hands it would become insipid: nice. Again and again

Finney returns

to that word; things in Santa Mira, he tells us, are not great, not wild and crazy, not terrible, not

boring. Things in Santa Mira are nice. No one here is laboring under that old Chinese curse

"May you live in interesting times."

"For the first time I really saw her face again. I saw it was the same nice face . .

." This from

page nine. A few pages later: "It was nice out, temperature around sixty-five, and the light was

good; . . . still plenty of sun."

Cousin Wilma is also nice, if rather plain. Miles thinks she would have made a good wife and

mother, but she just never married. "That's how it goes," Miles philosophizes, innocently

unaware of any banality. 'He tells us he wouldn't have believed her the type of woman to have

mental problems, "but still, you never know."

This stuff shouldn't work, and yet somehow it does; we feel that Miles has somehow stepped

through the first-person convention and is actually talking to us, just as it seems that Tom

Sawyer is actually talking to us in the Twain novel . . . and Santa Mira, California, as Finney

presents it to us, is exactly the sort of town where we would almost expect to see Tom

whitewashing a fence (there would be no Huck around, sleeping in a hogshead, though; not in

Santa Mira).

The Body Snatchers is the only Finney book which can rightly be called a horror novel, but

Santa Mira-which is a typical "nice" Finney setting-is the perfect locale for such a tale.

Perhaps one horror novel is all that Finney had to write; certainly it was enough to set the mold

for what we now call "the modern horror novel." If there is such a thing, there can be no doubt at all that Finney had a large hand in inventing it. I have used the phrase "off-key note" earlier on, and that is Finney's actual method in *The Body Snatchers*, I think; one off-key note, then two, then a ripple, then a run of them. Finally the jagged, discordant music of horror overwhelms the melody entirely. But Finney understands that there is no horror without beauty; no discord without a prior sense of melody; no nasty without nice. There are no Plains of Leng here; no Cyclopean ruins under the earth; no shambling monsters in the subway tunnels under New York. At about the same time Jack Finney was writing *The Body Snatchers*, Richard Matheson was writing his classic short story "Born of Man and Woman," the story that begins: "today my mother called me retch. you retch she said." Between the two of them, they made the break from the Lovecraftian fantasy that had held Page 239 danse macabre Stephen King sway over serious American writers of horror for two decades or more. Matheson's short story was published well before *Weird Tales* went broke; Finney's novel was published by Dell a

year after. Although Matheson published two early short stories in *Weird Tales*, neither writer is associated with this icon of American fantasy-horror magazines; they represent the birth of an almost entirely new breed of American fantasist, just as, in the years 1977-1980, the emergence of Ramsey Campbell and Robert Aickman in England may represent another significant turn of the wheel. *

I have mentioned that Finney's short story "The Third Level" predates Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* series; in exactly the same fashion, Finney's little town of Santa Mira predates and points the way toward Peter Straub's fictional town of Milburn, New York; Thomas Tryon's *Cornwall* Coombe, Connecticut; and my own little town of *Salem's Lot*, Maine. It is even possible to see Finney's influence in Blatty's *The Exorcist*, where foul doings become fouler when set against the backdrop of Georgetown, a suburb which is quite, graciously rich . . . and nice. Finney concentrates on sewing a seam between the prosaic reality of his little you-can-see-it-before-your-eyes town and the outright fantasy of the pods which will follow. He sews the seam with such fine stitchwork that when we cross over from the world that really is and into a world of utter make-believe, we are hardly aware of any change. This is a

major

feat, and like the magician who can make the cards walk effortlessly over the tips
of his fingers

in apparent defiance of gravity, it looks so easy that you'd be tempted to believe
anyone could

do it. You see the trick, but not the long hours of practice that went into creating
the effect.

We have spoken briefly of paranoia in *Rosemary's Baby*; in *The Body Snatchers*, the
paranoia becomes full, rounded, and complete. If we are all incipient paranoids-if
we all take

a quick glance down at ourselves when laughter erupts at the cocktail party, just to
make sure

we're zipped up and it isn't us they're laughing at-then I'd suggest that Finney
uses this

incipient paranoia quite deliberately to manipulate our emotions in favor of Miles,
Becky, and

Miles's friends, the Belicecs.

*At the same time Finney and Matheson began administering their own particular
brands of shock treatment to

the American imagination. Ray Bradbury began to be noticed in the fantasy community,
and during the fifties and

sixties, Bradbury's name would become the one most readily identified with the genre
in the mind of the general

reading public. But for me, Bradbury lives and works alone in his own country, and
his remarkable, iconoclastic

style has never been successfully imitated. Vulgarly put, when God made Ray Bradbury

He broke the mold.

Wilma, for instance, can present no proof that her Uncle Ira is no longer her Uncle

Ira, but

she impresses us with her strong conviction and with a deep, free-floating anxiety

as pervasive

as a migraine headache. Here is a kind of paranoid dream, as seamless and as perfect

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as

anything out of a Paul Bowles novel or a Joyce Carol Oates tale of the uncanny

Wilma sat staring at me, eyes intense. "I've been waiting for today," she whispered.

"Waiting till he'd get a haircut, and he finally did." Again she leaned toward me,

eyes big,

her voice a hissing whisper. "There's a little scar on the back of Ira's neck; he

had a boil

there once, and your father lanced it. You can't see the scar," she whispered, "when

he

needs a haircut. But when his neck is shaved, you can. Well, today-I've been waiting

for

this!-today he got a haircut-"

I sat forward, suddenly excited. "And the scar's gone? You mean-"

"No!" she said, almost indignantly, eyes flashing. "It's there-the scar-exactly like

Uncle

Ira's!"

So Finney serves notice that we are working here in a world of utter subjectivity .

. . and

utter paranoia. Of course we believe Wilma at once, even though we have no real proof, if for

no other reason, we know from the title of the book that the "body snatchers" are out there somewhere.

By putting us on Wilma's side from the start, Finney has turned us into equivalents of John

the Baptist, crying in the wilderness. It is easy enough to see why the book was eagerly seized

upon by those who felt, in the early fifties, that there was either a Communist conspiracy afoot,

or perhaps a fascist conspiracy that was operating in the name of antiCommunism.

Because,

either way or neither way, this is a book about conspiracy with strong paranoid overtones . . .

in other words, exactly the sort of story to be claimed as political allegory by political loonies of every stripe.

Earlier on, I mentioned the idea that perfect paranoia is perfect awareness. To that we could

add that paranoia may be the last defense of the overstrained mind. Much of the literature of

the twentieth century, from such diverse sources as Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edward

Albee, Thomas Hardy, even F. Scott Fitzgerald, has suggested that we live in an

existential

sort of world, a planless insane asylum where things just happen. IS GOD DEAD? asks

the

Time magazine cover in the waiting room of Rosemary Woodhouse's Satanic

obstetrician. In

such a world it is perfectly credible that a mental defective should sit on the

upper floor of a

little-used building, wearing a Hanes t-shirt, eating take-out chicken, and waiting

to use his

mail-order rifle to blow out the brains of an American president; perfectly possible

that another

mental defective should be able to stand around in a hotel kitchen a few years later

waiting to

do exactly the same thing to that defunct president's younger brother; perfectly

understandable

that nice American boys from Iowa and California and Delaware should have spent

their tours

in Vietnam collecting ears, many of them extremely tiny; that the world should begin

to move

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once more toward the brink of an apocalyptic war because of the preachings of an

eighty-year-old Moslem holy man who is probably foggy on what he had for breakfast

by the

time sunset rolls around.

All of these things are mentally acceptable if we accept the idea that God has
abdicated for
a long vacation, or has perchance really expired. They are mentally acceptable, but
our
emotions, our spirits, and most of all our passion for order-these powerful elements
of our
human makeup-all rebel. If we suggest that there was no reason for the deaths of six
million
Jews in the camps during World War II, no reason for poets bludgeoned, old women
raped,
children turned into soap, that it just happened and nobody was really
responsible-things just
got a little out of control here, ha-ha, so sorry-then the mind begins to totter.
I saw this happen at first-hand in the sixties, at the height of the generational
shudder that
began with our involvement in Vietnam and went on to encompass everything from
parietal
hours on college campuses and the voting franchise at eighteen to corporate
responsibility for
environmental pollution.
I was in college at the time, attending the University of Maine, and while I began
college with
political leanings too far to the right to actually become radicalized, by 1968 my
mind had been
changed forever about a number of fundamental questions. The hero of Jack Finney's
later

novel, *Time and Again*, says it better than I could:

I was . . . an ordinary person who long after he was grown retained the childhood assumption that the people who largely control our lives are somehow better informed than,

and have judgment superior to, the rest of us; that they are more intelligent. Not until

Vietnam did I finally realize that some of the most important decisions of all time can be

made by men knowing really no more than most of the rest of us."

For me, it was a nearly overwhelming discovery-one that really began to happen, perhaps,

on that day in the Stratford Theater when the announcement that the Russians had orbited a

space satellite was made to me and my contemporaries by a theater manager who looked like

he had been gutshot at close range.

But for all of that, I found it impossible to embrace the mushrooming paranoia of the last four

years of the sixties completely. In 1968, during my junior year at college, three Black Panthers

from Boston came to my school and talked (under the auspices of the Public Lecture Series)

about how the American business establishment, mostly under the guidance of the Rockefellers and AT&T, was responsible for creating the neofascist political state of Amerika,

encouraging the war in Vietnam because it was good for business, and also encouraging an ever more virulent climate of racism, stateism, and sexism. Johnson was their puppet; Humphrey and Nixon were also their puppets; it was a case of "meet the new boss, same as

Page 242

danse macabre Stephen King the old boss," as the Who would say a year or two later; the only solution was to take it into the streets. They finished with the Panther slogan, "all power comes out of the barrel of a gun," and adjured us to remember Fred Hampton.

Now, I did not and do not believe that the hands of the Rockefellers were utterly clean

during that period, nor those of AT&T; I did and do believe that companies like Sikorsky and

Douglas Aircraft and Dow Chemical and even the Bank of America subscribed more or less to

the idea that war is good business (but never invest your son as long as you can slug the draft

board in favor of the right kind of people; when at all possible, feed the war machine the spies

and the niggers and the poor white trash from Appalachia, but not our boys, oh no, never our

boys!); I did and do believe that the death of Fred Hampton was a case of police

manslaughter

at the very least. But these Black Panthers were suggesting a huge umbrella of

conscious

conspiracy that was laughable . . . except the audience wasn't laughing. During the

Q-and-A

period, they were asking sober, concerned questions about just how the conspiracy

was

working, who was in charge, how they got their orders out, et cetera.

Finally I got up and said something like, "Are you really suggesting that there is

an actual

Board of Fascist Conspiracy in this country? That the conspirators-the president of

GM and

Exxon, plus David and Nelson Rockefeller-are maybe meeting in a big underground

chamber

beneath the Bonneville Salt Flats with agendas containing items on how more blacks

can be

drafted and the war in Southeast Asia prolonged?" I was finishing with the

suggestion that

perhaps these executives were arriving at their underground fortress in flying

saucers-thus

handily accounting for the upswing in UFO sightings as well as for the war in

Vietnam-when

the audience began to shout angrily for me to sit down and shut up. Which I did

posthaste,

blushing furiously, knowing how those eccentrics who mount their soapboxes in Hyde

Park on

Sunday afternoons must feel. I did not much relish the feeling.

The Panther who spoke did not respond to my question (which, to be fair, wasn't a question

at all, really) ; he merely said softly, "You got a surprise, didn't you, man?" This was greeted

with a burst of applause and laughter from the audience.

I did get a surprise-and a pretty unpleasant one, at that. But some thought has convinced

me that it was impossible for those of my generation, propelled harum-scarum through the

sixties, hair flying back from our foreheads, eyes bugging out with a mixture of delight and

terror, from the Kingsmen doing "Louie Louie" to the blasting fuzztones of the Jefferson

Airplane, to get from point A to point Z without a belief that someone-even Nelson Rockefeller-was pulling the strings.

In various ways throughout this book I've tried to suggest that the horror story is in many

ways an optimistic, upbeat experience; that it is often the tough mind's way of

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copied with

terrible problems which may not be supernatural at all but perfectly real. Paranoia may be the

last and strongest bastion of such an optimistic view-it is the mind crying out,

"Something

rational and understandable is going on here! These things do not just happen!"

So we look at a shadow and say there was a man on the grassy knoll at Dallas; we say that

James Earl Ray was in the pay of certain big Southern business interests, or maybe the CIA;

we ignore the fact that American business interests exist in complex circles of power, often

revolving in direct opposition to one another, and suggest that our stupid but mostly well-meant

involvement in Vietnam was a conspiracy hatched by the military-industrial complex; or that, as

a recent rash of badly spelled and printed posters in New York suggested, that the Ayatollah

Khomeini is a puppet of-yeah, you guessed it-David Rockefeller. We suggest, in our endless inventiveness, that Captain Mantell did not die of oxygen starvation back there in 1947

while chasing that odd daytime reflection of Venus which veteran pilots call a sundog; no, he

was chasing a ship from another world which exploded his plane with a death ray when he got too close.

It would be wrong of me to leave you with any impression that I am inviting the two of us to

have a good laugh at these things together; I am not. These things are not the

beliefs of

madmen but the beliefs of sane men and women trying desperately, not to preserve the status

quo, but just to find the fucking thing. And when Becky Driscoll's cousin Wilma says her Uncle

Ira isn't her Uncle Ira, we believe her instinctively and immediately. If we don't believe her, all

we've got is a spinster going quietly dotty in a small California town. The idea does not appeal;

in a sane world, nice middle-aged ladies like Wilma aren't s'posed to go bookers. It isn't right.

There's a whisper of chaos in it that's somehow more scary than believing she might be right

about Uncle Ira. We believe because belief affirms the lady's sanity. We believe her because .

. . because . . . because something is going on! All those paranoid fantasies are really not

fantasies at all. We-and Cousin Wilma-are right; it's the world that's gone haywire.

The idea

that the world has gone haywire is pretty bad, but as we can cope with Bill Nolan's fifty-foot

bug once we see what it really is, so we can cope with a haywire world if we just know where

our feet are planted. Bob Dylan speaks to the existentialist in us when he tells us that

"Something is going on here/But you don't know what it is/Do you, Mr. Jones?"

Finney-in the

guise of Miles Bennell-takes us firmly by the arm and tells us that he knows exactly what's

going on here: it's those goddamn pods from space! They're responsible!

It's fun to trace the classic threads of paranoia Finney weaves into his story.

While Miles and

Becky are at a movie, Miles's writer friend Jack Belicec asks Miles to come and take a look at

something he's found in his basement. The something turns out to be the body of a

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naked man

on a pool table, a body which seems to Miles, Becky, Jack, and Jack's wife,

Theodora,

somehow unformed-not yet quite shaped. It's a pod, of course, and the shape it is taking is

Jack's own. Shortly we have concrete proof that something is terribly wrong:

Becky actually moaned when we saw the [finger] prints, and I think we all felt sick.

Because it's one thing to speculate about a body that's never been alive, a blank.

But it's

something very different, something that touches whatever is primitive deep in your brain,

to have that speculation proved. There were no prints; there were five absolutely smooth,

solidly black circles.

These four-now aware of the pod conspiracy-agree not to call the police immediately
but

to see how the pods develop. Miles takes Becky home and then goes home himself,
leaving

the Belicecs to stand watch over the thing on the pool table. But in the middle of
the night

Theodora Belicec freaks out and the two of them show up on Miles's doorstep. Miles
calls a

psychiatrist friend, Mannie Kaufman (a shrink? we are immediately suspicious; we
don't need a

shrink here, we want to shout at Miles; call out the Army!), to come and sit with
the Belicecs

while he goes after Becky . . . who earlier has confessed to feeling that her father
is no longer
her father.

On the bottom shelf of a cupboard in the Driscoll basement, Miles finds a blank
which is

developing into a pseudo-Becky. Finney does a brilliant job of describing what this
coming-to-being would look like. He compares it to fine-stamping medallions; to
developing a

photograph; and later to those eerie, lifelike South American dolls. But in our
current state of

high nervousness, what really impresses us is how neatly the thing has been tucked
away,

hidden behind a closed door in a dusty basement, biding its time.

Becky has been drugged by her "father," and in a scene simply charged with romance,

Miles

spirits her out of the house and carries her through the sleeping streets of Santa

Mira in his

arms; it is no trick to imagine the gauzy stuff of her nightgown nearly glowing in the moonlight.

And the fallout of all this? When Mannie Kaufman arrives, the men return to the

Belicec house

to investigate the basement:

There was no body on the table. Under the bright, shadowless light from the overhead

lay the brilliant green felt, and on the felt, except at the corners and along the

sides, lay a

sort of thick gray fluff that might have fallen, or been jarred loose, I supposed,

from the

open rafters.

For an instant, his mouth hanging open, Jack stared at the table. Then he swung to

Mannie, and his voice protesting, asking for belief, he said, "It was there on the

table!

Mannie, it was!"

Mannie smiled, nodding quickly. "I believe you, Jack . . .

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But we know that's what all of these shrinks say . . . just before they call for the

men in the

white coats. We know that fluff isn't just fluff from the overhead rafters; the

damned thing has

gone to seed. But nobody else knows it, and Jack is quickly reduced to the final plea of the

helpless paranoiac: You gotta believe me, doc!

Mannie Kaufman's rationalization for the increasing number of people in Santa Mira who no

longer believe their relatives are their relatives is that Santa Mirans are undergoing a case of

low-key mass hysteria, the sort of thing that may have been behind the Salem witch trials, the

mass suicides in Guyana, even the dancing sickness of the middle ages. But below this

rationalistic approach, existentialism lurks unpleasantly. These things happen, he seems to

suggest, just because they happen. Sooner or later they will work themselves out.

They do, too. Mrs. Seeley, who believed her husband wasn't her husband, comes in to tell

Miles that everything is fine now. Ditto the girls who were scared of their English instructor for

awhile. And ditto Cousin Wilma, who calls up Miles to tell him how embarrassed she is at

having caused such a fuss; of course Uncle Ira is Uncle Ira. And in every case, one other

fact-a name-stands out: Mannie Kaufman was there, helping them all. Something is wrong

here, all right, but we know very well what it is, thank you, Mr. Jones. We have noticed the way

Kaufman's name keeps cropping up. We're not stupid, right? Damn right we're not! And

it's

pretty obvious that Mannie Kaufman is now playing for the visiting team.

And one more thing. At Jack Belicec's insistence, Miles finally decides to call a

friend in the

Pentagon and spill the whole incredible story. About his long distance call to

Washington,

Miles tells us:

It isn't easy explaining a long, complicated story over the telephone And we

had bad

luck with the connection. At first I heard Ben and he heard me, as clearly as though

we

were next door to each other. But when I began telling him what had been happening

here,

the connection faded. Ben had to keep asking me to repeat, and I almost had to shout

to

make him understand me. You can't talk well, you can't even think properly, when you

have

to repeat every other phrase, and I signaled the operator and asked for a better

connection

. . . I'd hardly resumed when a sort of buzzing sound started in the receiver in my

ear, and

then I had to try to talk over that . . .

"They," of course, are now in charge of communications coming into and going out of

Santa

Mira ("We are controlling transmission," that somehow frightening voice which introduced The Outer Limits each week used to say; "We will control the horizontal . . . we will control the vertical . . . we can roll the image, make it flutter . . . we can change the focus . . .") . Such a

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passage will also strike a responsive chord in any old antiwar protester, SDS member, or

activist who ever believed his or her phone was tapped or that the guy with the Nikon on the

edge of the demonstration was taking his or her picture for a dossier someplace.

They are

everywhere; they are watching; they are listening. Surely it is no wonder that

Siegel believed

that Finney's novel was about a-Red-under-every-bed or that others believed it was about the

creeping fascist menace. As we descend deeper and deeper into the whirlpool of this nightmare it might even become possible to believe it was the pod people who were on the

grassy knoll in Dallas, or that it was the pod-people who obediently swallowed their poisoned

Kool-Aid at Jonestown and then spritzed it down the throats of their squalling infants. It would

be such a relief to be able to believe that.

Miles's conversation with his Army friend is the book's clearest delineation of the paranoid mind at work. Even when you know the whole story, you aren't allowed to communicate it to those in authority . . . and it's hard to think with that buzzing in your head!

Linked to this is the strong sense of xenophobia Finney's major characters feel. The pods really are "a threat to our way of life," as Joe McCarthy used to say. "They'll have to declare martial law," Jack tells Miles, "a state of siege, or something-anything! And then do whatever has to be done. Root this thing out, smash it, crush it, kill it."

Later, during their brief flight from Santa Mira, Miles and Jack discover two pods in the trunk of the car. This is how Miles describes what happens next:

And there they lay, in the advancing, retreating waves of flickering red light: two enormous pods already burst open in one or two places, and I reached in with both hands, and tumbled them out onto the dirt. They were weightless as children's balloons, harsh and dry on my palms and fingers. At the feel of them on my skin, I lost my mind completely, and then I was trampling them, smashing and crushing them under my plunging feet and legs, not even knowing that I was uttering a sort of hoarse, meaningless cry- "Unhh! Unhh!

Unhh!"-of fright and animal disgust.

No friendly, stoned-out hippies holding up signs reading STOP AND BE FRIENDLY here;

here we have Miles and Jack, mostly out of their minds, doing the funky chicken over

these

weird and insensate invaders from space. There is no discussion (vis-à-vis The

Thing) of what

we could learn from these things to the benefit of modern science. There is no white

flag here,

no parley; Finney's aliens are as strange and as ugly as those bloated leeches you

sometimes

find clinging to your skin after swimming in still ponds. There is no reasoning

here, nor any

effort to reason; only Miles's blind and primitive reaction to the alien outsider.

The book which most closely resembles Finney's is Robert A. Heinlein's *The Puppet*

Masters; like Finney's novel, it is perhaps nominally sf but is in fact a horror

novel. In this one,

invaders from Saturn's largest moon, Titan, arrive on Earth, ready, willing, and

able to do

business. Heinlein's creatures are not pods; they are the leeches in actuality. They

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are sluglike

creatures that ride on the backs of their hosts' necks the way that you or I might

ride a horse.

The two books are similar-strikingly so-in many ways. Heinlein's narrator begins by

wondering aloud if "they" were truly intelligent. He ends after the menace has been

defeated.

The narrator is one of those building and manning rocketships aimed at Titan; now that the tree has been chopped down, they will burn the roots. "Death and destruction!" the narrator exults, thus ending the book.

But what exactly is the threat which the pods in Finney's novel pose? For Finney, the fact that they will mean the end of the human race seems almost secondary (pod people have no interest in what an old acquaintance of mine likes to refer to as "doing the trick"). The real horror, for Jack Finney, seems to be that they threaten all that "nice" and I think this is where we came in. On his way to his office not too long after the pod invasion is well launched, Miles describes the scenery this way:

. . . the look of Throckmorton Street depressed me. It seemed littered and shabby in the morning sun, a city trash basket stood heaped and unemptied from the day before, the globe of an overhead streetlight was broken, and a few doors down . . . a shop stood empty. The windows were whitened, and a clumsily painted For Rent sign stood leaning against the glass. It didn't say where to apply, though, and I had a feeling no one cared whether the store was ever rented again. A smashed wine bottle lay in the

entranceway of

my building, and the brass nameplate set in the gray stone of the building was mottled and unpolished.

From Jack Finney's fiercely individualistic point of view, the worst thing about the Body

Snatchers is that they will allow the nice little town of Santa Mira to turn into something

resembling a subway station on Forty-second Street in New York. Humans, Finney asserts,

have a natural drive to create order out of chaos (which fits well enough with the book's

paranoid themes). Humans want to improve the universe. These are old-fashioned ideas,

perhaps, but Finney is a traditionalist, as Richard Gid Powers points out in his introduction to

the Gregg Press edition of the novel. From where Finney stands, the scariest thing about the

pod people is that chaos doesn't bother them a bit and they have absolutely no sense of

aesthetics: this is not an invasion of roses from outer space but rather an infestation of

ragweed. The pod people are going to mow their lawns for awhile and then give it up. They

don't give a shit about the crabgrass. They aren't going to be making any trips down to the

Santa Mira True Value Hardware so they can turn that musty old basement annex into a
rec

room in the best do-it-yourself tradition. A salesman who blows into town complains
about the

state of the roads. If they aren't patched soon, he says, Santa Mira will be cut off

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from the

world. But do you think the pod people are going to lose any sleep over a little
thing like that?

Here's what Richard Gid Powers says in his introduction about Finney's outlook:

With the hindsight afforded by Finney's later books, it is easy to see what the
critics

overlooked [when they] interpreted both the book and the movie . . . simply as
products of

the anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthyite fifties, a know-nothing outburst
against

"alien ways of life" . . . that threatened the American way. Miles Bennell is a
precursor of all

the other traditionalist heroes of Jack Finney's later books, but in *The Body*
Snatchers,

Miles's town of Santa Mira, Marin County, California still is the unspoiled mythical
gemeinschaft community that later heroes have had to travel through time to
recapture.

When Miles begins to suspect that his neighbors are no longer real human beings and

are

no longer capable of sincere human feelings, he is encountering the beginning of the insidious modernization and dehumanization that faces later Finney heroes as an accomplished fact.

Miles Bennell's victory over the pods is fully consistent with the adventures of subsequent Finney characters: his resistance to depersonalization is so fierce that the pods finally give up on their plans for planetary colonization and mosey off to another planet

where the inhabitants' hold on their self-integrity is not so strong.

Further on, Powers has this to say about the archetypical Finney hero in general and the

purposes of this book in particular:

Finney's heroes, particularly Miles Bennell, are all inner-directed individualists in an

increasingly other-directed world. Their adventures could be used as classroom illustrations

of Tocqueville's theory about the plight of a free individual in a mass democracy .

. . . The

Body Snatchers is a raw and direct mass-market version of the despair over cultural dehumanization that fills T. S. Eliot's "Wasteland" and William Faulkner's The Sound and

the Fury. Finney adroitly uses the classic science fiction situation of an invasion from outer

space to symbolize the annihilation of the free personality in contemporary society

. . . he

succeeded in creating the most memorable of all pop cultural images of what Jean

Shepherd

was describing on late-night radio as "creeping meatballism" : fields of pods that

hatch into

identical, spiritless, emotional vacuous zombies-who look so damned much just like

you

and me!

Finally, when we examine *The Body Snatchers* in light of the Tarot hand we have dealt

ourselves, we find in Finney's novel almost every damned card. There is the Vampire,

for

surely those whom the pods have attacked and drained of life have become a modern,

cultural

version of the undead, as Richard Gid Powers points out; there is the Werewolf, for

certainly

these people are not really people at all, and have undergone a terrible sea change;

the pods

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from space, a totally alien invasion of creatures who need no spaceships, can

certainly also fit

under the heading of the Thing Without a Name . . . and you might even say (if you

wanted to

stretch a point, and why the hell not?) that citizens of Santa Mira are no more than

Ghosts of

their former selves these days.

Not bad legs for a book which is "just a story."

6

Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* defies any neat and easy categorization or analysis . . . and so far, at least, it has also defied the moviemakers, in spite of any number of options and scenarios, including Bradbury's own. This novel, originally published in 1962 and promptly given a critical pasting by critics in both the science fiction and fantasy genres,* has gone on through two dozen printings since its original publication. For all of that, it has not been Bradbury's most successful book, or his best-known one; *The Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451*, and *Dandelion Wine* have probably all outsold it, and are certainly better known to the general reading public. But I believe that *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, a darkly poetic tall tale set in the half-real, half-mythical community of Green Town, Illinois, is probably Bradbury's best work—a shadowy descendant from that tradition that has brought us stories about Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, Pecos Bill, and Davy Crockett. It is not a perfect book; at times Bradbury lapses into the purple overwriting that has characterized too much of his work in the seventies. Some passages are self-imitative and

embarrassingly fulsome. But that is a small part of the total work; in most cases

Bradbury

carries his story off with guts and beauty and panache.

And it might be worth remembering that Theodore Dreiser, the author of *Sister Carrie*

and

An American Tragedy, was, like Bradbury, sometimes his own worst enemy . . . mostly

because Dreiser never knew when to stop. "When you open your mouth, Stevie," my

grandfather once said to me in despair, "all your guts fall out." I had no reply to

that then, but I

suppose if he were alive today, I would reply: That's 'cause I want to be Theodore

Dreiser

when I grow up. Well, Dreiser was a great writer, and Bradbury seems to be the

fantasy

genre's version of Dreiser, although Bradbury's line-by-line writing is better and

his touch is

lighter. Still, the two of them share a remarkable commonality.

On the minus side, both show a tendency to not so much write about a subject as to

bulldoze it into the ground . . . and once so bulldozed,

*Not much new in this. Writers in the fantasy and science fiction genres moan about

the critical coverage they

get from mainstream critics-sometimes with justification, sometimes without-but the

fact is most critics inside

the genre are intellectual corks. The genre magazines have a long and ignoble

history of roasting novels which

are too large for the genres from which they've come; Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in*

a Strange Land took a similar

pasting.

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both have a tendency to bludgeon the subject until all signs of movement have
ceased. On the

plus side, both Dreiser and Bradbury are American naturalists of a dark persuasion,
and in a

crazy sort of way they seem to bookend Sherwood Anderson, the American champ of
naturalism. Both of them wrote of American people living in the heartland (although
Dreiser's

heartland people come to the city while Bradbury's stay to home), of innocence
coming

heartbreakingly to experience (although Dreiser's people usually break, while
Bradbury's

people remain, although changed, whole), and both speak in voices which are
uniquely, even

startlingly American. Both narrate in a clear English which remains informal while
mostly

eschewing idiom-when Bradbury lapses occasionally into slang it startles us so much
that he

seems almost vulgar. Their voices are unmistakably American voices.

The easiest difference to point out, and maybe the most unimportant, is that Dreiser
is called

a realist while Bradbury is known as a fantasist. Even worse, Bradbury's paperback
publisher

insists tiresomely on calling him "The World's Greatest Living Science Fiction Writer" (making him sound like one of the freaks in the shows he writes about so often) , when Bradbury has never written anything but the most nominal science fiction. Even in his space stories, he is not interested in negativeion drives or relativity converters. There are rockets, he says in the connected stories which form The Martian Chronicler, R Is for Rocket, and S Is for Space. That is all you need to know and is, therefore, all I am going to tell you. To this I would add that if you want to know how the rockets are going to work in any hypothetical future, turn to Larry Niven or Robert Heinlein; if you want literature-stories, to use Jack Finney's word-about what the future might hold, you must go to Ray Bradbury or perhaps to Kurt Vonnegut. What powers the rockets is Popular Mechanics stuff. The province of the writer is what powers the people. All that said, it is impossible to talk of Something Wicked This Way Comes, which is most certainly not science fiction, without putting Bradbury's lifework in some sort of perspective. His best work, from the beginning, has been his fantasy . . . and his best fantasy has

been his

horror stories. As previously mentioned, the best of the early Bradbury was

collected in tile

marvelous Arkham House collection *Dark Carnival*. No easily obtainable edition of

this work,

the *Dubliners* of American fantasy fiction, is available. Many of the stories

originally published

in *Dark Carnival* can be found in a later collection, *The October Country*, which is

available in

paper. Included are such short Bradbury classics of gut-chilling horror as "The

Jar," "The

Crowd," and the unforgettable "Small Assassin." Other Bradbury stories published in

the forties

were so horrible that the author now repudiates them (some were adapted as comics

stories

and published, with a younger Bradbury's permission, in E.C.'s *The Crypt of Terror*).

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One of

these involves an undertaker who performs hideous but curiously moral atrocities

upon his

"clients"-for instance, when three old biddies who loved to gossip maliciously are

killed in an

accident, the undertaker chops off their heads and buries these three heads

together, mouth to

ear and ear to mouth, so they can enjoy a hideous kaffeeklatsch throughout eternity.

Of how his own life influenced the writing of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*,

Bradbury

says: "[*Something Wicked This Way Comes*] sums up my entire life of loving Lon Chaney

and

the magicians and grotesques he played in the twenties films. My mom took me to see

Hunchback in 1923 when I was three. It marked me forever. *Phantom [of the Opera]*

when I

was six. Same thing. *East of Zanzibar* when I was about eight. Magician turns himself

into a

skeleton in front of black natives! Incredible! *The Unholy Three* ditto! Chaney took

over my life.

I was a raving film maniac long before I hit my eighth year. I became a full-time

magician after

seeing *Blackstone* on stage in Waukegan, my home town in upper Illinois, when I was

nine.

When I was twelve, MR. ELECTRICO and 1115 traveling Electric Chair arrived with the

Dill

Brothers Sideshows and Carnival. That was his 'real' name. I got to know him. Sat by

the

lakeshore and talked grand philosophies . . . he his small ones, me my grandiose

supersized

ones about futures and magic. We corresponded several times. He lived in Cairo,

Illinois, and

was, he said, a defrocked Presbyterian minister. I wish I could remember his

Christian name.

But his letters have long since been lost in the years, though small magic tricks he gave me I still have. Anyway, magic and magicians and Chaney and libraries have filled my life. Libraries are the real birthing places of the universe for me. I lived in my home-town library more than I did at home. I loved it at night, prowling the stacks on my fat panther feet. All of that went into Something Wicked, which began as a short story in Weird Tales called "Black Ferris" in May, 1948, and just grew like Topsy . . .

Bradbury has continued to publish fantasy throughout his career, and although the Christian Science Monitor called Something Wicked This Way Comes a "nightmarish allegory," Bradbury really settles for allegory only in his science fiction. In his fantasy, his preoccupation has been with theme, character, symbol . . . and that fantastic rush that comes to the writer of fantasy when he puts the pedal to the metal, yanks back on the steering wheel, and drives his jalopy straight up into the black night of unreality.

Bradbury relates it this way: "['Black Ferris' became] a screenplay in 1958 the night I saw Gene Kelly's Invitation to the Dance and so much wanted to work for and with him [that] I

rushed home, finished up an outline of Dark Carnival (its then title) and ran it
over to his

house. Kelly flipped, said he would direct it, went off to Europe to find money,
never found any,

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came back discouraged, gave me back my screen treatment, some eighty pages or more,
and

told me Good Luck. I said to hell with it and sat down and spent two years, off and
on, finishing

Something Wicked. Along the way, I said all and everything, just about, that I would
ever want

to say about my younger self and how I felt about that terrifying thing: Life, and
that other

terror: Death, and the exhilaration of both.

"But, above all, I did a loving thing without knowing it. I wrote a paeon to my
father. I didn't

realize it until one night in 1965, a few years after the novel had been published.

Sleepless, I

got up and prowled my library, found the novel, reread certain portions, burst into
tears. My

father was locked into the novel, forever, as the father in the book! I wish he had
lived to read

himself there and be proud of his bravery in behalf of his loving son.

"Even writing this, I am touched again to remember with what a burst of joy and

agony I

found that my Dad was there, forever, forever for me anyway, locked on paper, kept
in print,
and beautiful to behold.

"I don't know what else to say. I loved every minutes of writing it. I took six
months off
between drafts. I never tire myself. I just let my subconscious throw up when it
feels like it.

"I love the book best of all the things I have ever written. I will love it, and the
people in it,
Dad and Mr. Electrico, and Will and Jim, the two halves of myself sorely tired and
tempted,
until the end of my days."

Maybe the first thing we notice in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is Bradbury's
splitting
of those two halves of himself. Will Halloway, the "good" boy (well, both of them
are good, but

Will's friend Jim goes astray for awhile), is born on October 30, a minute before
midnight. Jim

Nightshade is born two minutes later . . . a minute past midnight on Halloween
morning. Will is

Apollonian, a creature of reason and plan, a believer (mostly) in the status quo and
the norm.

Jim Nightshade, as his name implies, is the Dionysian half, a creature of emotion,
something
of a nihilist, hellbent for destruction, ready to spit in the devil's face just to

see if the spittle will

steam and sizzle running down the Dark Lord's cheek. When the lightning rod salesman comes to town at the beginning of Bradbury's fabulous tale ("running just ahead of the storm")

and tells the boys that lightning will strike Jim's house, Will has to persuade Jim to put the

lightning rod up. Jim's initial reaction is "Why spoil the fun?"

The symbolism of the times of birth is large, crude, and apparent; so is the symbolism of the

lightning rod salesman, who arrives as a harbinger of bad times. Bradbury pulls it off

nonetheless, mostly out of sheer fearlessness. He deals his archetypes large, like those

bridge-sized cards.

In Bradbury's story an ancient carnival, marvelously named Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show, arrives in Green Town, bringing misery and horror under the guise of pleasure and wonder. Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade-and later, Will's father,

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Charles, as well-wise up to exactly what this particular carnival is all about. The tale

eventually narrows down to the struggle for a single soul, that of Jim Nightshade.

To call it an

allegory would be wrong, but to call it a moral horror tale-much in the manner of

those E.C.

horror tales which foreran it-would be exactly right. In effect, what happens to Jim and Will is

not so much different from Pinocchio's scary encounter on Pleasure Island, where boys who

indulge their baser desires (smoking cigars and shooting snooker, for instance) are turned into

donkeys. Bradbury in writing here of carnal enticements-not just sexual carnality, but carnality

in its broadest forms and manifestations-the pleasures of the flesh run as wild as the tattooed

illustrations which cover Mr. Dark's body.*

*The one reference to sexual carnality here occurs during the business of the Theater, which Bradbury declined

to discuss in his letter to me, although I asked him if he would be so kind as to elaborate a bit. It remains one of

the book's most tantalizing episodes. Jim and Will discover the Theater, Bradbury says, on the upper floor of a

house "while they were monkey-climbing for the sourest apples." Bradbury tells us that looking into the Theater

changed everything, including the taste of the fruit, and while I have a tendency to bolt at the first stench of

graduate-school analysis like a horse smelling good water polluted with alkali, the apple-and-Eden metaphor here

is too strong to be denied. What exactly is going on in this second- or third-floor room, this "Theater" that changed

the taste of the apples, that so fascinates Jim of the dark name and his friend,
whose Christian name is so
associated with our supposed ability (our supposed Christian ability) to consciously
command goodness in any
given situation? Bradbury suggests that the Theater is one room in a whorehouse. The
people inside are naked;
they "let fall clothes to the rug, stood raw and animalcrazy, naked, like shivering
horses . . ." If so, it is the book's
most telling foreshadowing of the carnal deviation from the norm which so strongly
attracts Jim Nightshade as he
stands on the threshold of adolescence.

What saves Bradbury's novel from being merely a "nightmarish allegory" or a
simplistic fairy
story is its grasp of story and style. Bradbury's style, so attractive to me as an
adolescent, now
seems a bit oversweet. But it still wields a considerable power. Here is one of the
passages
which seems oversweet to me-

And Will? Why, he's the last peach, high on a summer tree. Some boys walk by and you
cry, seeing them. They feel good, they look good, they are good. Oh, they're not
above
peeing off a bridge, or stealing an occasional dime-store pencil-sharpener; it's not
that. It's
just, you know, seeing them pass, that's how they'll be all their life; they'll get
hit, hurt, cut,

bruised, and always wonder why, why does it happen?

-and one that seems just right:

The wails of a lifetime were gathered in [that trainwhistle] from other nights in

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other

slumbering years; the howls of moon-dreamed dogs, the sleep of river-cold winds

through

January porch screens which stopped the blood, a thousand fire-sirens weeping, or

worse!

the outgone shreds of breath, the protests of a billion people dead or dying, not

wanting to

be dead, their groans, their sighing, burst over the earth!

Man, that's a train whistle! I want to tell you!

More clearly than any other book discussed here, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*

reflects the differences between the Apollonian life and the Dionysian. Bradbury's

carnival,

which creeps inside the town limits and sets up shop in a meadow at three o'clock in

the

morning (Fitzgerald's dark night of the soul, if you like), is a symbol of

everything that is

abnormal, mutated, monstrous . . . Dionysian. I've always wondered if the appeal of

the

vampire myth for children doesn't lie partly in the simple fact that vampires get to

sleep all day

and stay up all night (vampires never have to miss Creature Features at midnight

because of

school the next day). Similarly, we know that part of this carnival's attraction for

Jim and Will

(sure, Will feels its pull too, although not as strongly as his friend Jim feels it;

even Will's father

is not entirely immune from its deadly siren song) is that there will be no set

bedtimes, no rules

and regulations, no dull and boring small town day after day, no "eat your broccoli,

think of the

people starving in China," no school. The carnival is chaos, it is the taboo land

made magically

portable, traveling from place to place and even from time to time with its freight

of freaks and

its glamorous attractions.

The boys (sure, Jim too) represent just the opposite. They are normal, not mutated,

not

monstrous. They live their lives by the rules of the sunlit world, Will willingly,

Jim impatiently.

Which is exactly why the carnival wants them. The essence of evil, Bradbury

suggests, is its

need to compromise and corrupt that delicate passage from innocence to experience

that all

children must make. In the rigid moral world of Bradbury's fiction, the freaks who

populate the

carnival have taken on the outward shapes of their inward vices. Mr. Cooger, who has

lived for
thousands of years, pays for his life of dark degeneracy by becoming a Thing even
more
ancient, ancient almost beyond our ability to comprehend, kept alive by a steady
flow of
electricity. The Human Skeleton is paying for miserliness of feeling; the fat lady
for physical or
emotional gluttony; the dust witch for her gossipy meddling in the lives of others.
The carnival
has done to them what the undertaker in that old Bradbury horror story did to his
victims after
they had died.

On its Apollonian side, the book asks us to recall and reexamine the facts and myths
of our
own childhoods, most specifically our small-town American childhoods. Written in a
semipoetic

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style that seems to suit such concerns perfectly, Bradbury examines these childhood
concerns
and comes to the conclusion that only children are equipped to deal with childhood's
myths
and terrors and exhalations. In his midfifties story "The Playground," a man who
returns
magically to childhood is propelled into a world of lunatic horror which is only,
after all, the

corner playground with its sandboxes and its slippery slide.

In *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Bradbury interconnects this small-town American

boyhood motif with most of the ideas of the new American gothic which we have

already

discussed to some extent. Will and Jim are essentially okay, essentially Apollonian,

riding easy

in their childhoods and used to looking at the world from their shorter height. But

when their

teacher, Miss Foley, returns to childhood-the first of the carnival's Green Town

victims-she

enters a world of monotonous, unending horror which is not much different from that

experienced by the protagonist of "The Playground." The boys discover Miss Foley-or

what

remains of her-under a tree .

. . . and there was the little girl, crouched, face buried in her hands, weeping as

if the

town were gone and the people in it and herself lost in a terrible woods.

And at last Jim came edging up and stood at the edge of the shadow and said, "Who is

it?"

"I don't know." But Will felt tears start to his eyes, as if some part of him

guessed.

"It's not Jenny Holdridge, is it?"

"No."

"Jane Franklin?"

"No." His mouth felt full of novocaine, his tongue merely stirred in his numb lips.

". . . no .

.."

The little girl wept feeling them near, but not looking up yet.

". . . me . . . help me . . . nobody'll help me . . . me . . . me . . . I don't like

this . . .

somebody must help me . . . someone must help her . . ." she mourned as for one

dead, ". .

. someone must help her . . . nobody will . . . nobody has . . . terrible . . .

terrible . . ."

The carnival "attraction" which has accomplished this malign trick is one that both

Narcissus

and Eleanor Vance could relate to: Miss Foley has been trapped in the carnival's

mirror maze,

imprisoned by her own reflection. Forty or fifty years have been jerked out from

under her and

she has been tumbled back into her own childhood . . . just what she thought she

wanted. She

had not considered the possibility of the nameless little girl weeping under the

tree.

Jim and Will avoid this fate- barely-and even manage to rescue Miss Foley on her

first

foray into the mirror maze. One supposes it is not the maze itself but the carousel

that has

actually accomplished her doubling back in time; the mirrors in the maze show you a

time of

life you think you'd like to have again, and the carousel actually accomplishes it.

The carousel

can add a year to your age each time you go around forward or make you a year

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younger for

every circle you make on it going backward. The carousel is Bradbury's interesting

and

workable metaphor for all of life's passages, and the fact that he darkens this

ride, which is

often associated with the sunniest pleasure we know as children, to fit the motif of

this

particular black carnival, causes other uneasy associations to come to mind. When we

see the

innocent merry-go-round with its prancing horses in this nether light, it may

suggest to us that if

time's passages are to be compared to a merry-go-round ride, then we see that each

year's

revolution is essentially the same as the last; it perhaps causes us to remember how

fleeting

and ephemeral such a ride is; and most of all it reminds us that the brass ring,

which we have

all tried so hard and fruitlessly to catch, is kept deliberately, tauntingly, out of

reach.

In terms of the new American gothic, we can see that the mirror maze is the

catch-trap, the

place where too much self-examination and morbid introspection persuades Miss Foley to step over the line into abnormality. In Bradbury's world-the world of Cooger and Dark's Pandemonium Shadow Show-there are no options: first caught in the glass of Narcissus, you then find yourself riding a dangerous carousel charger backwards into an untenable past or forward into an untenable future. Shirley Jackson uses the conventions of the new American gothic to examine character under extreme psychological-or perhaps occult-pressure; Peter Straub uses them to examine the effects of an evil past upon the present; Anne Rivers Siddons uses them to examine social codes and social pressures; Bradbury uses these self-same conventions in order to offer us a moral judgment. In describing Miss Foley's terror and grief in attaining the childhood she so desired, Bradbury goes far toward defusing the potential flood of sticky-sweet romanticism that might have destroyed his tale . . . and I think this defusing reinforces the moral judgments he makes. In spite of imagery that sometimes swamps us instead of uplifting us, he manages to retain his own clear point of view. This isn't to say Bradbury doesn't make a romantic myth of childhood, because he sure does. Childhood itself is a myth for almost all of us. We think we remember what

happened to

us when we were kids, but we don't. The reason is simple: we were crazy then.

Looking back

into this well of insanity as adults who are, if not totally insane, then at least

neurotic instead of

out-and-out psychotic, we attempt to make sense of things which made no sense, read

importance into things which had no importance, and remember motivations which

simply

didn't exist. This is where the process of myth making begins.*

Rather than trying to row against this strong current (as Golding and Hughes do),

Bradbury

uses it in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; blending the myth of childhood with the

myth of

the dream-father, whose part is played here by Will's dad, Charles Halloway . . .

and, if

Bradbury himself is to be believed, who is also played by that Illinois

power-linesman who was

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Ray Bradbury's Dad. Halloway is a librarian who lives his own life of dreams, who is

enough

boy to understand Will and Jim, but who is also enough adult to provide, in the end,

what the

boys cannot provide for themselves, that final ingredient in our perception of

Apollonian

morality, normality, and rectitude: simple accountability.

*The only novels I can think of that avoid making childhood into a myth or a fairy tale and still succeed

wonderfully as stories are William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *A High Wind in Jamaica* by Richard Hughes.

Someone will write me a letter and suggest that I should have added either Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* or

Beryl Bainbridge's *Harriet Said*, but I think that, in their differing ways (but uniquely British outlook), both of these

short novels romanticize childhood as thoroughly as Bradbury ever did.

Childhood is the time, Bradbury insists, when you are still able to believe in things you know

cannot be true:

"It's not true anyway," Will gasped. "Carnivals don't come this late in the year.

Silly

darn-sounding thing. Who'd go to it?"

"Me." Jim stood quiet in the dark.

Me, thought Will, seeing the guillotine flash, the Egyptian mirrors unfold accordions of

light, and the sulphur-skinned devil-man sipping lava, like gunpowder tea.

They simply believe; their hearts are still capable of overruling their heads. They are still

sure that they will be able to sell enough boxes of greeting cards or tins of Cloverine Salve to

get a bike or a stereo, that the toy will really do all the things you saw it do on TV and that "you

can put it together in just a matter of minutes with a few simple tools," or that
the monster
picture going on inside the theater will be as scary and wonderful as the posters
and stills
outside. That's okay; in Bradbury's world the myth is ultimately stronger than the
reality, and
the heart stronger than the head. Will and Jim stand revealed, not as the sordid,
dirty,
frightened boys of Lord of the Flies, but as creatures built almost entirely of
myth, a dream of
childhood which becomes more believable than reality in Bradbury's hand.
Through noon after noon, they had screamed up half the rides, knocked over dirty
milk
bottles, smashed kewpie-doll-winning plates, smelling, listening, looking their way
through
the autumn crowd trampling the leafy sawdust . . .
Where did they come by the wherewithal for their day at the fair? Most kids in a
similar
situation have to count their finances and then go through an agonizing process of
picking and
choosing; Jim and Will apparently do everything. But once again, it's okay. They are
our
representatives in the forgotten land of childhood, and their apparently endless
supply of cash
(plus their dead-eye aim at the china plates and pyramids of milk bottles) are

accepted with

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delight and little or no rational hesitation. We believe as we once believed that

Pecos Bill dug

the Grand Canyon one day when he came home tired, thus dragging his pick and shovel

behind him instead of carrying them over his shoulder. They are in terror, but it is

the unique

ability of these myth-children to enjoy their terror. "They both stopped to enjoy

the swift pound

of each other's heart," Bradbury relates.

Cooger and Dark become Bradbury's myth of evil, threatening these children not as

gangsters or kidnappers or any realistic bad guys; Cooger is more like Old Pew

returned from

Treasure Island, his blindness exchanged for a hideous fall of years that has been

dropped

upon him when the carousel goes wild. When he hisses at Will and Jim, "A . . .

sssshort . . .

sad life . . . for you both!" we feel the sort of comfortable chill we felt when the

Black Spot was

first passed at the Admiral Benbow.

Their hiding from the emissaries of the carnival, who come into town looking for

them under

the pretense of a free parade, becomes Bradbury's best summation of this childhood

remembered in myth; the childhood that might really have existed in short bursts

between long

stretches of boredom and such cheesy chores as carrying wood, doing dishes, putting out the

trash, or sitting baby brother or sister (and it's probably significant to this idea of the

dream-child that both Jim and Will are only children).

They . . . hid in old garages, they . . . hid in old barns . . . in the highest trees they could

climb and got bored and boredom was worse than fear so they came down and reported in

to the Police Chief and had a fine chat which gave them twenty safe minutes right in the

station and Will got the idea of touring churches and they climbed all the steeples in town

and scared pigeons off the belfries But there again they began to get starchy with

boredom and fatigued with sameness, and were almost on the point of giving themselves

up to the carnival in order to have something to do, when quite fortunately the sun went down.

The only effective foil for Bradbury's dream-children is Charles Halloway, the dream-father.

In the character of Charles Halloway we find attractions which only fantasy, with its strong

myth-making abilities, can give us. Three points about him are worth mentioning, I

think.

First, Charles Halloway understands the myth of childhood the two boys are living;

for all of

us who grew up and parted with some bitterness from our parents because we felt they

didn't

understand our youth, Bradbury gives us a portrait of the sort of parent we felt we

deserved.

His reactions are those which few real parents can ever afford to have. His

parenting instincts

are apparently supernaturally alert. Early on, he sees the boys running home from

watching

the carnival set up, and calls their names softly under his breath . . . but does no

more. Nor

does he mention it to Will later, although the two boys have been out at three

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o'clock in the

morning. He's not worried that they've been out scoring dope or mugging old ladies

or

shtupping their girl friends. He knows they have been out on boys' business, walking

the night

as boys sometimes will . . . and he lets it go.

Second, Charles Halloway comes by his understanding legitimately; he is still living

the myth

himself. Your father cannot be your pal very successfully, the psychology texts tell

us, but

there are few fathers, I think, who have not longed to be buddies with their sons,
and few sons
who have not wished for a buddy in their fathers. When Charles Halloway discovers
that Jim
and Will have nailed rungs under the climbing ivy on their respective houses so they
can
escape and reenter their bedrooms after bedtime, he does not demand that the rungs
be torn
down; his response is admiring laughter and an admonition that the boys not use the
rungs
unless they really have to. When Will tells his father in agony that no one will
believe them if
they try to explain what really happened in Miss Foley's house, where the evil
nephew Robert
(who is really Mr. Cooger, looking much younger since he has been reissued) framed
them for
a robbery, Halloway says simply, "I'll believe." He will believe because he is
really just one of
the boys and the sense of wonder has not died within him. Much later, while
rummaging
through his pockets, Charles Halloway almost seems like the world's oldest Tom
Sawyer:
And Will's father stood up, stuffed his pipe with tobacco, rummaged his pockets for
matches, brought out a battered harmonica, a penknife, a cigarette lighter that
wouldn't

work, and a memo pad he had always meant to write great thoughts down on but had never got around to

Almost everything, in fact, except a dead rat and a string to swing it on.

Third, Charles Halloway is the dream-father because he is, in the end, accountable.

He can

switch hats, in the blink of an eye, from that of the child to that of the adult. He

proves his

accountability and responsibility by a simple symbolic act: when Mr. Dark asks,

Halloway gives

him his name.

"A fine day to you, sir!"

No, Dad ! thought Will.

The Illustrated Man came back.

"Your name, sir?" he asked directly.

Don't tell him! thought Will.

Will's father debated a moment, took the cigar from his mouth, tapped ash and said quietly:

"Halloway. Work in the library. Drop by sometime."

"You can be sure, Mr. Halloway. I will."

. . . [Halloway] was also gazing with surprise at himself, accepting the surprise, the new

purpose, which was half despair, half serenity, now that the incredible deed was done. Let

no one ask why he had given his true name; even he could not assay and give its real

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weight

But isn't it most likely that he has given his true name because the boys cannot? He

must

front for them-which he does admirably. And when Jim's dark wishes finally lead him

into

what seems utter ruin, it is Halloway who emerges, first destroying the fearsome

Dust Witch,

then Mr. Dark himself, and finally leading the fight for Jim's life and soul.

Something Wicked This Way Comes is probably not Bradbury's best work overall-I

believe

he has always found the novel a difficult form to work in-but its mythic interests

are so well

suited to Bradbury's dreamy, semipoetic prose that it succeeds wonderfully and

becomes one

of those books about childhood (like Hughes's *A High Wind in Jamaica*, Stevenson's

Treasure

Island, Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, and Thomas Williams's *Tsuga's Children*, to name

just a

few) that adults should take down once in awhile . . . not just to give to their own

children, but

in order to touch base again themselves with childhood's brighter perspectives and

darker

dreams. Bradbury has introduced his novel with a quotation from Yeats: "Man is in

love, and

loves what vanishes." He adds others, but we will perhaps agree that the line from

Yeats is text

enough . . . but let Bradbury himself have the final word, concerning one of Green
Town's

fascinations for the two dream-children of whom he has written

"As for my gravestone? I would like to borrow that great barber-pole from out front
of the

town shoppe, and have it run at midnight if you happened to drop by my mound to say
hello. And there the old barberpole would be, lit, its bright ribbons twining up out
of mystery,

turning, and twining away up into further mysteries, forever. And if you come to
visit, leave

an apple for the ghosts."

An apple . . . or maybe a dead rat and a string to swing it on.

7

Richard Matheson's *The Shrinking Man* (1956) is another case of a fantasy novel
packaged

as science fiction in a rationalistic decade when even dreams had to have some sort
of basis

in reality-and this mislabeling of the book has continued right up to the present,
for no good

reason other than this is how publishers do things. "One of the most incredible
Science Fiction

classics of all time!" booms the cover of the recent Berkley reissue, ignoring the
fact that a

story in which a man shrinks at the steady rate of one-seventh of an inch a day has
really gone

beyond even the furthest realms of science fiction.

Matheson, like Bradbury, has no real interest in hard science fiction. He brings

forth an

obligatory amount of mumbo-jumbo (my favorite is when a doctor exclaims over Scott

Carey's

"incredible catabolism") and then drops it. We know that the process which

eventually results

in Scott Carey's being chased through his own basement by a black widow spider

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begins when

he is doused by a curtain of sparkling radioactive spray; the radioactivity

interacts with some

bug spray he had ingested into his system a few days earlier. It is this double play

that has

caused the shrinking process to begin. It is the most minimal nod at rationality, a

mid-twentieth-century version of pentagrams, mystic passes, and evil spells. Luckily

for us,

Matheson, like Bradbury, is more interested in Scott Carey's heart and mind than in

his

incredible catabolism.

It's worth noting that in *The Shrinking Man* we're back to the old radioactive blues

again, and

to the idea that horror fiction helps us to externalize in symbolic form whatever is

really

troubling us. It is impossible to see *The Shrinking Man* separated from its background of A-bomb tests, ICBMs, the "missile gap," and strontium-90 in the milk. If we look at it this way, Matheson's novel (his second published book, according to John Brosnan and John Clute, who collaborated on Matheson's entry in *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, citing Matheson's *I Am Legend* as the first; I believe they may have overlooked an earlier Richard Matheson novel, a war story titled *The Beardless Warriors*) is no more science fiction than such Big Bug movies as *The Deadly Mantis* or *Beginning of the End*. But Matheson is doing more in *The Shrinking Man* than having radioactive nightmares; the title of Matheson's novel alone suggests bad dreams of a more Freudian nature. Concerning *The Body Snatchers*, we'll remember Richard Gid Powers saying that Miles Bennell's victory over the pods is a direct result of Miles's resistance against depersonalization, his fierce individualism, and his defense of more traditional American values. These same things can be said about the Matheson novel, * with one important variation. It seems to me that

*Nor is this the only time that these two very different writers have taken up a

similar theme. Both have written time-travel stories of men who are driven to escape a terrible present for a friendlier past: Finney's *Time and Again* (1970), in which the hero returns to turn-of-the-century times on America's east coast, and Matheson's *Bid Time Return* (1975), in which the hero returns to turn-of-the century times on America's west coast. In both cases, their desire to escape what Powers calls "cultural depersonalization" is a factor, but more different treatments of the idea-and different outcomes-cannot be imagined.

while Powers is right in suggesting that *The Body Snatchers* is in large part about the depersonalization, even the annihilation of the free personality in our society, *The Shrinking Man* is a story about the free personality's loss of power and growing impotency in a world increasingly controlled by machines, red tape, and a balance of terror where future wars are planned with one eye always cocked toward an "acceptable kill ratio." In Scott Carey we see

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danse macabre Stephen King one of the most inspired and original symbols of this modern devaluation of human currency ever created. Carey muses at one point that he is not shrinking at all; that

instead, the world is
growing larger. But seen either way-devaluation of the individual or inflation of
the
environment-the result is the same: as Scott shrinks, he retains his essential
individuality but
gradually loses more and more control over his world anyway. Also like Finney,
Matheson
sees his work as "just a story," and one he is not even particularly in touch with
anymore. His
comments:
"I started working on the book in 1955. It was the only book I ever wrote back
east-if you
exclude a novel I wrote when I was sixteen and living in Brooklyn. Things had been
going
badly out here [in California] and I thought it might be a good idea to be back east
and close to
editors for the sake of my career; I had given up on the idea of getting into
movies. Actually,
there was nothing rational in the move. I was just fed up out here on the coast and
talked
myself into going back east. My family was there. My brother had a business there
and I knew
I could get some work for us to live on if I couldn't sell any writing. * So we
went. We were
renting a house at Sound Beach on Long Island when I wrote the book. I had gotten
the idea

several years earlier while attending a movie in a Redondo Beach theater. It was a
silly
comedy with Ray Milland and Jane Wyman and Aldo Ray and, in this particular scene,
Ray
Milland, leaving Jane's apartment in a huff, accidentally put on Aldo Ray's hat,
which sank
down around his ears. Something in me asked, 'What would happen if a man put on a
hat
which he knew was his and the same thing happened?' Thus the notion came.
"The entire novel was written in the cellar of the rented house on Long Island. I
did a shrewd
thing in that. I didn't alter the cellar at all.
*In *The Shrinking Man*, Scott Carey's life becomes an ever-louder, ever more
discordant medley of anxieties;
one of the greatest is the shrinking money supply and his inability to support his
family as he always has. I won't
say that Matheson has done anything so simple as transferring his own feelings at
the time to his character, but I
will suggest that perhaps Matheson's own frustrations at the time enabled him to
write Carey's character that
much more convincingly.
There was a rocking chair down there and, every morning, I would go down into the
cellar with
my pad and pencil and I -would imagine what my hero was up to that day. * I didn't
have to

keep the environment in my mind or keep notes. I had it all there, frozen. It was intriguing, when I watched them shoot the film, to see the cellar set because it reminded me a good deal of the cellar in Sound Beach and I had a momentary, enjoyable sense of déjà vu. "It took me about two and a half months to write the novel. I originally used the structure the movie did, starting with the beginning of the shrinking process. This didn't work as

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danse macabre Stephen King it took too long to get to 'the good stuff.' So I recast the storyline to get the reader into the cellar immediately. Recently, when I thought they were going to do a remake of the film and I thought they wanted me to do it, I decided I would revert to the original structure because, in [the film], as in my original manuscript, 'the good stuff' took awhile to get to. But it turned out they were going to make it into a comedy with Lily Tomlin and I wasn't going to write it anyway. John Landis was going to direct it at the time and he wanted all the science-fantasy people out here to play minor parts in the film. He wanted me to play a pharmacist who . . . won't give a prescription to Lily Tomlin who is so small at the time that she is sitting on the

shoulder of an

intelligent gorilla (shows you how they changed the original idea). I demurred. As a

matter of

fact, the opening of the script is almost like my original one to the point of

actual dialogue.

Later, it deviates wildly

"I don't think the book means anything to me at this time. None of my work does from

this

distant past. I think I prefer I Am Legend if I had to choose but they are both too

far from me to

have any significance in particular Accordingly, I wouldn't change anything

about The

Shrinking Man. It is a part of my history. I have no reason to change it, only to

look at it without

much interest and be pleased at whatever stir it made. I just read the first story I

ever sold the

other day-'Born of Man and Woman'-[and] I cannot relate to the story at all. I

remember

writing certain phrases but it was someone else who wrote them. I'm sure you feel

that way

about the early stuff you wrote. **

*Matheson's hero, Scott Carey, also goes down into the cellar every day with his pad

and pencil; he too is

writing a book (these days, isn't everybody?). Scott's book is about his experiences

as the world's only shrinking

man, and it provides for his family quite adequately . . . as Matheson's own book and the subsequent film made from it did for Matheson's own family, one supposes.

**As a matter of fact, I do. My first novel, *Carrie*, was written under difficult personal circumstances, and the book dealt with characters so unpleasant and so alien to my own outlook as to seem almost like Martians. When I pick up the book now-which is seldom-it does not seem as if someone else had written it, but I do get a peculiar sort of feeling from it . . . as if I had written it while suffering from a bad case of mental and emotional flu.

"*The Shrinking Man* only recently had a hardcover edition. Now it is being printed by the

Science Fiction Book Club too. Up to then it was strictly softcover . . .

Actually, *I Am Legend*

is much more science fiction than *The Shrinking Man*. It has a lot of research in it.

The science

in *The Shrinking Man* is strictly gobbledegook. Well, I did come asking around and reading but

I hardly had a great rationale for Scott Carey's shrinking. And I wince daily . . .

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that I made him

shrink 1/7" a day instead of geometrically and that I had him worry about falling from heights

when it wouldn't have hurt him. Well, to hell with it. I wouldn't have written 'Born

of Man and

Woman' a few years later either because it is so illogical. What difference does it make really?

"As I said, I enjoyed writing the book . . . because I was like Scott Carey's

Boswell, watching

him each day as he made his way around the cellar. I had a piece of cake with my coffee the

first few days of writing and I laid it on the shelf and soon it became a part of the story. I think

that some of the incidents during his shrinking period are pretty good-the man who picks him

up when he hitchhikes, the midget, the boys chasing him, his deteriorating marriage relationship."

A summary of *The Shrinking Man* is easy to render if we view it in the linear fashion Matheson suggests. After going through the sparkling cloud of radioactivity, Carey begins to

lose a seventh of an inch a day, or roughly one foot per season. As Matheson suggests, this

smacks of expediency, but as he also suggests, what does it matter as long as we realize that

this is not hard science fiction and that it bears no resemblance to novels and stories by writers

such as Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, or Larry Niven? It is not exactly sensible that the

children in the C. S. Lewis tale should be able to reach another world by going

through a

bedroom closet, either, but that is exactly what happens in the Narnia stories. It

is not the

technicalities of shrinking that we are interested in, and the inch-per-week pattern

at least

enables us to keep our own mental yardstick on Scott Carey.

We are given Scott's adventures in flashbacks as his shrinks; the main action takes

place in

what Scott assumes is his last week of life, as he shrinks from one inch down to

nothing. He

has gotten trapped in the cellar while trying to escape his own housecat and a

garden sparrow.

There's something particularly chilling in Scott's desperate duel with Puss; does

anyone have

the slightest doubt about what would happen if we were suddenly changed to a height

of seven

inches tall by malign magic and yon kitty curled up by the fire woke up and happened

to see us

skittering across the floor? Cats, those amoral gunslingers of the animal world, are

maybe the

scariest mammals going. I wouldn't want to be up against one in a situation like

that.

Perhaps above all else, Matheson excels at the depiction of one man alone, locked in

a

desperate struggle against a force or forces bigger than himself. Here is the

conclusion of

Scott's battle with the bird that knocks him into his cellar prison:

He stood up, flinging more snow at the bird, seeing the snow splatter off its dark,

flaring

beak. The bird flapped back. Scott turned and struggled a few more strides, then the

bird

was on him again, wet wings pounding at his head. He slapped wildly at it and felt

his

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hands strike the bony sides of its beak. It flew off again

Until, finally, cold and dripping, he stood with his back to the cellar window,

hurling snow

at the bird in the desperate hope that it would give up and he wouldn't have to jump

into the

imprisoning cellar.

But the bird kept coming, diving at him, hovering before him, the sound of its wings

like

wet sheets flapping in a heavy wind. Suddenly the jabbing beak was hammering at his

skull, slashing skin, knocking him back against the house He picked up snow

and

threw it, missing. The wings were still beating at his face; the beak gashed his

face again.

With a stricken cry, Scott whirled and leaped for the open square. He crawled across

it

dizzily. The leaping bird knocked him through.

When the bird knocks Scott into the cellar, the man is seven inches tall. Matheson has made

it clear that the novel is, to a large extent, a simple comparison of the macrocosm and the

microcosm, and his hero's seven weeks in this lower world are a tiny capsule of experience

which exactly mimes what he has already been through in a larger world. When he falls into

the cellar, he is its king; he is able to exert his own human power over the environment with no

real trouble. But as he continues to shrink, his power begins to wane once again . . . and the

Nemesis appears.

The spider rushed at him across the shadowed sands, scrabbling wildly on its stalklike

legs. Its body was a giant, glossy egg that trembled blackly as it charged across the

windless mounds, its wake a score of sand-trickling scratches . . . the spider was gaining

on him, its pulsing egg of a body perched on running legs-an egg whose yolk swam with

killing poisons. He raced on, breathless, terror in his veins.

In Matheson's view, macrocosm and microcosm are terms which are ultimately interchangeable, and all of Scott's problems throughout the shrinking process become symbolized in the black widow spider which also shares Scott's cellar world. When Scott

discovers the one thing in his life which has not shrunk, his ability to think and plan, he also discovers a source of power which is immutable no matter which -cosm it happens to exist in.

His escape from a cellar, which Matheson succeeds in making as strange and frightening as

any alien world, follows . . . and his final heartening discovery "that to nature there was no

zero," and that there is a place where the macrocosm and the microcosm eventually meet.

The Shrinking Man can be read simply enough as a great adventure story-it is certainly

one of that select handful that I have given to people, envying them the experience of the first

reading (others would include Bloch's The Scarf, Tolkien's The Hobbit, Berton Rouché's

Feral). But there's more going on in Matheson's novel than just adventure, a kind of surreal

Outward Bound program for little people. On a more thoughtful level, it is a short
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novel which

deals in a thoughtprovoking way with concepts of power-power lost and power found.

Let me pull back from the Matheson book briefly-like Douglas MacArthur, I shall
returnand

make the following wild statement: all fantasy fiction is essentially about the concept of

power; great fantasy fiction is about people who find it at great cost or lose it tragically;

mediocre fantasy fiction is about people who have it and never lose it but simply wield it.

Mediocre fantasy fiction generally appeals to people who feel a decided shortage of power in

their own lives and obtain a vicarious shot of it by reading stories of strong-thewed barbarians

whose extraordinary prowess at fighting is only excelled by their extraordinary prowess at

fucking; in these stories we are apt to encounter a seven-foot-tall hero fighting his way up the

alabaster stairs of some ruined temple, a flashing sword in one hand and a scantily clad

beauty lolling over his free arm.

This sort of fiction, commonly called "sword and sorcery" by its fans, is not fantasy at its

lowest, but it still has a pretty tacky feel; mostly it's the Hardy Boys dressed up in animal skins

and rated R (and with cover art by Jeff Jones, as likely as not). Sword and sorcery novels and

stories are tales of power for the powerless. The fellow who is afraid of being rousted by those

young punks who hang around his bus stop can go home at night and imagine himself

wielding

a sword, his potbelly miraculously gone, his slack muscles magically transmuted into those

"iron thews" which have been sung and storied in the pulps for the last fifty years.

The only writer who really got away with this sort of stuff was Robert E. Howard, a peculiar

genius who lived and died in rural Texas (Howard committed suicide as his mother lay

comatose and terminally ill, apparently unable to face life without her). Howard overcame the

limitations of his puerile material by the force and fury of his writing and by his imagination,

which was powerful beyond his hero Conan's wildest dreams of power. In his best work,

Howard's writing seems so highly charged with energy that it nearly gives off sparks. Stories

such as "The People of the Black Circle" glow with the fierce and eldritch light of his frenzied

intensity. At his best, Howard was the Thomas Wolfe of fantasy, and most of his Conan tales

seem to almost fall over themselves in their need to get out. Yet his other work was either

unremarkable or just abysmal The word will hurt and anger his legion of fans, but I don't

believe any other word fits. Robert Bloch, one of Howard's contemporaries, suggested

in his

first letter to Weird Tales that even Conan wasn't that much shakes. Bloch's idea

was that

Conan should be banished to the outer darkness where he could use his sword to cut

out

paper dolls. Needless to say, this suggestion did not go over well with the marching

hordes of

Conan fans; they probably would have lynched poor Bob Bloch on the spot, had they

caught

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up with him back there in Milwaukee.

Even below the sword and sorcery stories are the superheroes who populate the comic

magazines of the only two remaining giants in the field-although "giants" is almost

too strong

a word; according to a survey published in a 1978 issue of Warren's Creepy magazine,

comic

readership has gone into what may be an irrecoverable skid. These characters (

traditionally

called "long-underwear heroes" by the bullpen artists who draw them) are invincible.

Blood

never flows from their magical bodies; they are somehow able to bring such colorful

villains as

Lex Luthor and the Sandman to justice without ever having to remove their masks and

testify

against them in open court; they are sometimes down but never out.*

*One reason for the success of Marvel's Spiderman when he burst on the comics scene in the late fifties may have been his vulnerability; he was and is an engaging exception to the standard comic-book formula. There is something winning in his vulnerability as Peter Parker and in his frequent klutziness as Spiderman. After being bitten by that radioactive spider, Peter originally felt no holy desire to fight crime; he decided instead to make a bundle in showbiz. Before long, however, he discovers a truth which is bitter to him and amusing to the reader: no matter how great you looked on the Sullivan show, Marine Midland Bank still won't cash a check made out to The Amazing Spiderman. Such touches of realism laced with rue can be traced to Stan Lee, Spiderman's creator and the man probably most responsible for keeping the comic book from going the way of the pulps and the dime novels in the sixties and seventies.

At the other end of the spectrum are the characters of fantasy who are either powerless and discover power within themselves (as Thomas Covenant discovers it in Stephen Donaldson's remarkable Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever trilogy, or as Frodo discovers it in Tolkien's epic tale of the Rings), or characters who lose power and then find it again, as Scott Carey does in

The Shrinking Man.

Horror fiction, as we've said before, is one small circular area in the larger circle of fantasy,

and what is fantasy fiction but tales of magic? And what are tales of magic but stories of

power? One word nearly defines the other. Power is magic; power is potency. The opposite of

potency is impotence, and impotence is the loss of the magic. There is no impotence in the

stories of the sword and sorcery genre, nor in those stories of Batman and Superman and

Captain Marvel which we read as children and then-hopefully-gave up as we moved on to

more challenging literature and wider views of what the life experience really is.

The great

theme of fantasy fiction is not holding the magic and wielding it (if so, Sauron, not Frodo,

would have been the hero of Tolkien's Rings cycle); it is-or so it seems to me-finding the

magic and discovering how it works.

And getting back to the Matheson novel, shrinking itself is an oddly arresting

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concept, isn't

it? Tons of symbolism come immediately to mind, most of it revolving around the potency/

impotency thing . . . sexual and otherwise. In Matheson's book, shrinking is most important

because Scott Carey begins by perceiving size as power, size as potency . . . size as magic.

When he begins to shrink, he begins to lose all three-or so he believes until his perceptions

change. His reaction to his loss of power, potency, and magic is most commonly a blind,

bellowing rage:

"What do you think I'm going to do?" he burst out. "Go on letting them play with me?"

Oh,

you haven't been there, you haven't seen. They're like kids with a new toy. A

shrinking

man. Godawmighty, a shrinking man! It makes their damn eyes light up . . .

Like Thomas Covenant's constant cries of "By hell!" in the Donaldson trilogy,

Scott's rage

does not hide his impotency but highlights it, and it is Scott's fury which in a

large part makes

him such an interesting, believable character. He is not Conan or Superman (Scott

bleeds

plenty before escaping his cellar prison, and as we watch him go ever more

frantically about

the task of trying to escape, we suspect at times that he is more than half-mad) or

Doc

Savage. Scott doesn't always know what to do. He fumbles the ball frequently, and

when he

does, he goes on to do what most of us would probably do under the circumstances: he

has

the adult equivalent of a tantrum.

In fact, if we regard Scott's shrinking as a symbol for any incurable disease (and

the

progress of any incurable disease entails a kind of power loss which is analogous to shrinking),

we see a pattern which psychologists would outline pretty much as Matheson wrote it

. . . only

the outline came years later. Scott follows this course, from disbelief to rage to

depression to

final acceptance, almost exactly. As with cancer patients, the final trick seems to

be to accept

the inevitable, perhaps to find fresh lines of power leading back into the magic. In

Scott's case,

in the case of many terminal patients, the final outward sign of this is an

admission of the

inevitable, followed by a kind of euphoria.

We can understand Matheson's decision to use flashbacks in order to get to "the good stuff"

early on, but one wonders what might have happened if he had given us the story in a straight

line. We see Scott's loss of power in several widely spaced episodes: he is chased

by

teenagers at one point-they think, and why not, that he is just a little kid-and at

another he

hitches a ride with a man who turns out to be a homosexual. He begins to feel an

increasing

disrespect from his daughter Beth, partly because of the "might makes right" idea

that works

unobtrusively but powerfully in even the most enlightened parent-child relationships

(or, we

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could say, might makes power . . . or might makes magic), but perhaps mostly because

his

steady shrinking causes Beth to have to constantly restructure her feelings about

her father,

who ends up living in a dollhouse before his fall into the cellar. We can even

blackly visualize

Beth, who doesn't really understand what's happening, inviting her friends in on a

rainy day to

play with her daddy.

But Scott's most painful problems are with Lou, his wife. They are both personal and

sexual,

and I think that most men, even today, tend to identify the magic most strongly with

sexual

potency. A woman may not want to but she can; a man may want to and find he cannot.

Bad

news. And when Scott is 4'1" tall, he comes home from the medical center where he

has been

undergoing tests and walks straight into a situation where the loss of sexual magic

becomes

painfully evident:

Louise looked up, smiling. "You look so nice and clean," she said.

It was not the words or the look on her face; but suddenly he was terribly conscious

of

his size. Lips twitching into the semblance of a smile, he walked over to the couch

and sat

down beside her, instantly sorry that he had.

She sniffed. "Mmmmm, you smell nice," she said . . .

"You look nice," he said. "Beautiful."

"Beautiful!" She scoffed. "Not me."

He leaned over abruptly and kissed her warm throat. She raised her left hand and

stroked his cheek slowly.

"So nice and smooth," she murmured.

He swallowed . . . was she actually talking to him as if he were a boy?

And a few minutes later:

He let breath trickle slowly from his nostrils.

"I guess it . . . would be rather grotesque anyway It'd be like . . ."

"Honey, please." She wouldn't let him finish. "You're making it worse than it is."

"Look at me," he said. "How much worse can it get?"

Later on, in another flashback, we see Scott as voyeur, spying on the babysitter

Louise has

hired to care for Beth. In a series of comic-horrible scenes, Scott turns the

pimpily, overweight

babysitter into a kind of masterbatory dream goddess. In his doubling back to powerless early adolescence, Matheson is able to show us just how much of the sexual magic Scott has lost.

But at a carnival some weeks later-Scott is a foot and a half tall at this point-he meets

Clarice, a sideshow midget. And in his encounter with Clarice, we have our clearest indication

of Matheson's belief that the lost magic can be found again; that the magic exists on many

levels and thus becomes the unifying force that makes macrocosm and microcosm one and

the same. When he first meets Clarice, Scott is a bit taller than she, and in her trailer he finds a

world which is once more in perspective. It is an environment where he can reassert his own

power:

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Breath stopped. It was his world, his very own world-chairs and a couch he could sit on

without being engulfed; tables he could stand beside and reach across instead of walk

under; lamps he could switch on and off, not stand futilely beneath as if they were trees.

And-almost needless to relate-he also rediscovers the sexual magic with Clarice in an episode which is both pathetic and touching. We understand he will lose this magic as well, sinking away from Clarice's level until she is also a giant to him, and while these episodes are somewhat softened by the flashback form, the point is nevertheless made: what can be found once can be found again, and the incident of Clarice most clearly justifies the novel's odd but strangely powerful ending: ` . . . he thought: If nature existed on endless levels, so also might intelligence . . . Scott Carey ran into his new world, searching." Not, we devoutly hope, to be eaten by the first garden slug or amoeba to cross his path. In the movie version, which Matheson also wrote, Scott's final line is a triumphant "I still exist!" accompanied by shots of nebulae and exploding galaxies. I asked him if this had religious connotations, or perhaps reflected an early interest in life after death (a subject which has become more and more important in Matheson's later work; see *Hell House* and *What Dreams May Come*). Matheson comments: "Scott Carey's 'I still exist,' I think, only implied a continuum between macroscopic and microscopic, not between life and life after death.

Interestingly, I was on the verge of doing a rewrite on *The Fantastic Voyage*, which Columbia

is supposed to be making. I couldn't get involved in it because it was so technical and I would

rather be involved with character now, but it was like a small continuation of the end of *The*

Shrinking Man-into the microscopic world with rod and gun."

Overall, we can say that *The Shrinking Man* is a classic survival story; there is really only

one character, and the questions here are elemental: food, shelter, survival, destruction of the

Nemesis (the Dionysian force in Scott's mostly Apollonian cellar world). It is by no means a

tremendously sexy book, but sex is at least dealt with on a level more thoughtful than the Shell

Scott wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am level that was the common one for paperback originals in

the fifties. Matheson was an important figure in pioneering the right of science fiction and

fantasy writers to deal with sexual problems in a realistic and sensitive way; others involved in

the same struggle (and it was a struggle) would have included Philip José Farmer, Harlan

Ellison, and, perhaps most importantly of all, Theodore Sturgeon. It is hard to believe now what

a furor was caused by the concluding pages of Sturgeon's *Some of Your Blood*, when it is

revealed exactly how the vampire has been obtaining his supply ("The moon is full,"

he writes

both wistfully and chillingly to his girl friend in the book's final paragraph, "and

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I wish I had

some of your blood."), but the furor happened. We may wish that Matheson had dealt

with the

sexual angle a little less solemnly, but in light of the times, I think we can

applaud the fact that

he dealt with the sexual angle at all.

And as a fable of losing power and finding it, *The Shrinking Man* ranks as one of the

finest

fantasies of the period we've been discussing. And I don't want to leave you with

the

impression that I'm only talking here about sexual power and sexual potency. There

are

tiresome critics-the half-baked Freudians, mostly-who want to relate all of fantasy

and

horror fiction back to sex; one explanation for the conclusion of *The Shrinking Man*

which I

heard at a party in the fall of 1978-I'll not mention the name of the woman whose

theory this

was, but if you read science fiction, you'd know the name-maybe bears repeating,

since we're
on this. In symbolic terms, this woman said, spiders represent the vagina. Scott
finally kills his
Nemesis, the black widow (the most vaginal of all spiders) by impaling it on a pin
(the phallic
symbol, get it, get it?). Thus, this critic went on, after failing at sex with his
wife, succeeding at
first with the carnival midget Clarice and then losing her, Scott symbolically kills
his own sex
drive by impaling the spider. This is his last sexual act before escaping the cellar
and achieving
a wider freedom.
All of this was well-meaning bullshit, but bullshit is still bullshit and will never
be mistaken for
McDonald's Secret Sauce. I bring it up only to point out that it is the sort of
bullshit that a lot of
fantasy and horror writers have had to labor under . . . most of it spread by people
who believe
either secretly or openly that the horror writer must be suffering from madness to a
greater or a
lesser degree. The further view of such folks is that the writer's books are
Rorschach inkblots
that will eventually reveal the author's anal, oral, or genital fixation. In writing
about the largely
scoffing reaction that Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel*

received when it

was published in 1960, Wilfrid Sheed adds, "Freudian interpretations [are] always greeted by

guffaws." Not much bad news at that, when you remember that even the most staid novelists

are regarded as a bit peculiar by their neighbors . . . but the horror novelist is always going to

have to face what I think of as the couch questions, I guess. And most of us are perfectly

normal. Heh-heh-heh.

Freudian huggermugger set aside, *The Shrinking Man* can be seen as just a pretty good story which happens to deal with the interior politics of power . . . or, if you

like (and I do), the

interior politics of magic. And Scott's killing of the spider is meant to show us that the magic is

not dependent on size but upon mind and heart. If it stands considerably taller than other

books in the genre (small pun much intended), and far above other books where tiny people

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battle beetles and praying mantises and such (Lindsay Gutteridge's *Cold War in a Country*

Garden comes to mind), it is because Matheson couches his story in such intimate and riveting

terms-and because he is ultimately so persuasive. *

*This examination of lives in microcosm continues to hold a fascination for writers and readers; early this year, Macmillan published *Small World* by Tabitha King, a malign comedy of manners revolving around a fabulously expensive presidential dollhouse, a nymphomaniacal presidential daughter, and an overweight mad scientist who is as pitiable as he is frightening. Published in 1981, it lies outside the temporal borders of this book, which is probably just as well; the lady is my wife, and my view would be prejudiced. So I'll only add that my prejudiced view is that *Small World* is a wonderful addition to this HO-scale subgenre.

8

It wouldn't be right to wind up even so brief a discussion of the modern horror novel as this one without mentioning two young British writers, Ramsey Campbell and James Herbert. They are a part of a whole new generation of British fantasy writers who seem to be revitalizing the genre by cross-fertilization much as British poets helped to revitalize American poetry during the early sixties. Besides Campbell and Herbert, the two who are perhaps best known over here, there is Robert Aickman (who could hardly be called a young Turk-but since such books as *Cold Hand in Mine* have brought him to a wider American audience, it seems

fair

enough to classify him as part of the British new wave), Nick Sharman, Thomas

Tessier, an

American living in London, who has recently published a novel called The

Nightwalker,

perhaps the finest werewolf novel of the last twenty years, and a score of others.

As Paul Theroux-another expatriate American living in London-has pointed out, there

is

something uniquely British about the tale of horror (perhaps particularly those

which deal with

the archetype of the Ghost). Theroux, who has written his own low-key horror tale,

The Black

House, favors the mannered but grisly tales of M. R. James, and they do seem to

summarize

everything that is best in the classic British horror story. Ramsey Campbell and

James Herbert

are both modernists, and while this family is really too small to avoid a certain

resemblance

even in cousins twice removed, it seems to me that both of these men, who are worlds

apart in

terms of style, point of view, and method of attack, are doing things that are

exciting and

worthy of mention.

Campbell, a Liverpudlian ("You talk just like one of the Beatles," a woman marvels

to a

writer from Liverpool in Campbell's new novel, The Parasite), writes a cool, almost

icy prose

line, and his perspective on his native Liverpool is always a trifle offbeat, a

trifle unsettling. In a

Campbell novel or story, one seems to view the world through the thin and shifting

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perceptual

haze of an LSD trip that is just ending . . . or just beginning. The polish of his

writing and his

mannered turns of phrase and image make him seem something like the genre's Joyce

Carol

Oates (and like Oates, he is prolific, turning out good short stories, novels, and

essays at an

amazing clip), and there is also something Oatesian in the way his characters view

the world as

when one is journeying on mild LSD, there is something chilly and faintly

schizophrenic in

the way his characters see things . . . and in the things they see. These are the

perceptions of

Rose as she shops in a Liverpool department store in *The Parasite*:

A group of toddlers watched her pass, their eyes painted into their sockets. On the ground floor, red and pink and yellow hands on stalks reached for her from the glove counter. Blind mauve faces craned on necks as long as arms; wigs roosted on their heads .

. . . The bald man was still staring at her. His head, which looked perched on top

of a

bookcase, shone like plastic beneath the fluorescent lights. His eyes were bright,
flat,

expressionless as glass; she thought of a display head stripped of its wig. When a
fat pink

tongue squeezed out between his lips, it was as if a plastic head had come to life.

Good stuff. But strange; so uniquely Campbell that it might as well be trademarked.

Good

horror novels are not a dime a dozen-by no means-but there never seems to be any
serious

shortage of good ones, either. And by that I mean that you seem to be able to count
on a really

good novel of horror and/or the supernatural (or at least a really interesting one)
every year or

so-and much the same could be said for the horror films. A vintage year may produce
as

many as three amid the paperback-original dreck about hateful, paranormal children
and

presidential candidates from hell and the too-large collection of hardcover boners,
such as the

recent *Virgin*, by James Petersen. But, maybe paradoxically, maybe not, good horror
writers

are quite rare . . . and Campbell is better than just good.

That's one reason fans of the genre will greet *The Parasite* with such pleasure and
relief; it

is even better than his first novel, of which I want to treat briefly here. Campbell

has been

turning out his own patented brand of short horror tale for some years now (like

Bradbury and

Robert Bloch, Arkham House published Ramsey Campbell's first book, The Inhabitant of

the

Lake, which was a Lovecraft clone). Several collections of his stories are

available, the best of

them probably being The Height of the Scream. A story you will not find in that

book,

unfortunately, is "The Companion," in which a lonely roan who tours "funfairs" on

his holidays

encounters a horror beyond my ability to describe while riding a Ghost Train into

its tunnel.

"The Companion" may be the best horror tale to be written in English in the last

thirty years; it

is surely one of half a dozen or so which will still be in print and commonly read a

hundred

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years from now. Campbell is literate in a field which has attracted too many

comic-book

intellects, cool in a field where too many writers-myself included-tend toward

panting

melodrama, fluid in a field where many of the best practitioners often fall prey to

cant and

stupid "rules" of fantasy composition.

But not all good short-story writers in this field are able to make the jump to the novel (Poe

tried with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and made a conditional success of the job;

Lovecraft failed ambitiously twice, with *The Strange Case of Charles Dexter Ward* and the

rather more interesting *At the Mountains of Madness*, whose plot is remarkably Pym-like) .

Campbell made the jump almost effortlessly, with a novel as good as its title was off-putting:

The Doll Who Ate His Mother. The book was published with absolutely no fanfare in 1977 in

hardcover, and then with an even greater lack of fanfare a year later in paperback .

. . . one of

those cases that make a writer wonder if publishers don't practice their own sort of voodoo,

singling certain books out to be ritually slaughtered in the marketplace.

Well, never mind that. Concerning the jump from the short story to the novel-writing the

latter is much like long-distance running, and you can almost feel some would-be novelists

getting tired. You sense they're starting to breathe a trifle hard by page one hundred, to puff

and blow by page two hundred, and to finally limp over the finish line with little to recommend

them beyond the bare fact that they have finished. But Campbell runs well.

He is personally an amusing, even a jolly man (at the 1979 World Fantasy Convention

he

presented Stephen R. Donaldson with the British Fantasy Award, a modernistic little statuette,

for his Thomas Covenant trilogy; Campbell, in that marvelously broad and calm

Liverpool

accent, referred to it as "the skeletal dildo." The audience broke up, and someone at my table

marveled, "He sounds just like one of the Beatles."). As with Robert Bloch, the last thing you

would suspect is that he is a writer of horror fiction, particularly of the grim brand he turns out.

Of The Doll Who Ate His Mother he has this to say-some of it bearing directly on the difference in the amount of endurance needed to do a novel: "What I wanted to do with The

Doll was to invent a new monster, if that is possible, but perhaps the big thing was to actually

write the novel, since previously I'd been doing short stories. In 1961 or '62 I made notes for a

story about a black magician who was going to take revenge on his town or village for some

real or imagined wrong it had done him. He was going to do this by using voodoo dolls to

deform the babies-you'd have the standard pulp-magazine scene of the white-faced

doctor

coming out of the delivery room saying, 'My God, it's not human . . . !' And the twist was going

to be that, after all these deformed infants had died, the black magician would use the voodoo

dolls to bring them back to life. An amazingly tasteless idea. At about the same

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time the

Thalidomide tragedy occurred, making the story idea a little too 'topically tasteless' for me, and

I dropped it.

"It resurfaced, I suppose, in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*, which eats its way out of its

mother's womb.

"How does writing novels differ from writing short stories? I think a novel gathers its own

impetus. I have to creep up on it unawares, thinking to myself, 'Maybe I'll start it next week,

maybe I'll start it next month.' Then one day I sat down, began to write, and looked up at noon,

thinking: 'My God! I've started a novel! I don't believe it!

"Kirby [McCauley] said, when I asked him how long the novel should be, that 70,000 words

or so would be about right, and I took him almost literally. When I got up around the 63,000

word mark, I thought: 'Only 7000 words left-time to wrap this up.' That's why many of the

later chapters seems terse."

Campbell's novel begins with Clare Frayn's brother Rob losing an arm and his life in a

Liverpool car accident. The arm, torn off in the accident, is important because somebody

makes off with it . . . and eats it. This muncher of arms, we are led to suppose, is a shadowy

young man named Chris Kelly. Clare-who embodies many of the ideas already labeled as "new American gothic" (sure, Campbell is British, but many of his influences-both literary and

cinematic-are American)-meets a crime reporter named Edmund Hall who believes that the

man who caused Rob Frayn's death was the grown-up version of a boy he knew in school, a

boy fascinated with death and cannibalism. In dealing with archetypes, I've not suggested that

we deal out a Tarot card for the Ghoul, one of the more grisly creatures in monsterdom,

believing that the eating of dead flesh and the drinking of blood are really parts of the same

archetype. * Is there really such a thing as a "new monster"? In light of the genre's strictness, I

think not, and Campbell must be content instead with a fresh perspective . . . no

mean feat in

itself. In Chris Kelly I believe the face we see is that of our old friend the

Vampire . . . as we

see it in a movie which resembles Campbell's novel by turns, the brilliant Canadian

director

David Cronenberg's *They Came from Within*.

Clare, Edmund Hall, and George Pugh, a cinema owner whose elderly mother has also

been victimized by Kelly, join together in a strange and reluctant three-way

partnership to track

this supernatural cannibal down. Here again we feel echoes of the classic tale of

the Vampire,

Stoker's *Dracula*. And perhaps we never feel the changes of the nearly eighty years

which lie

between the two books so strongly as we do in the contrast between the group of six

which

forms to track down Count Dracula and the group of three which forms to track down

"Chris

Kelly." There is no sense of self-righteousness in Clare, Edmund, and George-they

are truly

little people, afraid, confused, often depressed; they turn inward to themselves

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rather than

outward toward each other, and while we sense their fright very strongly, there is

no feeling

about the book that Clare, Edmund, and George must prevail because their cause is

just. They

somehow symbolize the glum and rather drab place England has become in the second

half of

the twentieth century, and we feel that if some or all of them do muddle through, it

will be due

more to impersonal luck than to any action of their own.

And the three of them do track Kelly down . . . after a fashion. The climax of the

hunt takes

place in the rotting cellar of a slum building marked for demolition, and here

Campbell has

created one of the dreamiest and effective sequences in all of modern horror

fiction. In

*Stories of ghouls and cannibalism venture into genuine taboo territory, I

think-witness the strong public

reactions to George Romero's Night of the Living Dead and Dawn of the Dead.

Something rather more important

than a harmless roller-coaster ride is going on here, I think; here's a chance to

really grab people by the gag reflex

and throttle them. I wrote a story four years ago called "Survivor Type," which I

still have not been able to sell

(gee, and people told me that when I got successful I'd be able to sell my laundry

list if I wanted to!). It deals with

a surgeon who is washed up on an uninhabited island-little more than a scratch of

coral above the surface of the

Pacific-and eats himself, a piece at a time, to stay alive. "I did everything

according to Hoyle," he writes in his
diary after amputating his foot. "I washed it before I ate it." Not even the men's
magazines would consider that
one, and it sits in my file cabinet to this day, waiting for a good home. It will
probably never find one, though.
its surreal and nightmarish evocation of ancient evil, in the glimpses it gives us
of "absolute
power," it is finally a voice from the latter part of the twentieth century which
speaks powerfully
in the language which Lovecraft can be said to have invented. Here is nothing so
pallid or so
imitative as a Lovecraft "pastiche," but a viable, believable version of those
Lovecraftian Elder
Gods that so haunted Dunwich, Arkham, Providence, Central Falls . . . and the pages
of *Weird
Tales* magazine.
Campbell is good, if rather unsympathetic, with character (his lack of emotion has
the effect
of chilling his prose even further, and some readers will be put off by the tone of
this novel;
they may feel that Campbell has not so much written a novel as grown one in a Petrie
dish):
Clare Frayn with her stumpy legs and her dreams of grace, Edmund with his baleful
thoughts
of glory yet to come, and best of all, because here Campbell does seem to kindle
real feelings

of emotion and kindness, George Pugh holding on to the last of his cinemas and
scolding two

teenage girls who walk out before the playing of the National Anthem has finished.

But perhaps the central character here is Liverpool itself, with its orange sodium
lights, its

slums and docks, its cinemas converted into HALF A MILE OF FURNITURE. Campbell's
short

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stories live and breathe Liverpool in what seems to be equal amounts of attraction
and

repulsion, and that sense of place is one of the most remarkable things about The
Doll as well.

This locale is as richly textured as Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles of the forties
and fifties or

Larry McMurtry's Houston of the sixties. "Children were playing ball against the
church,"

Campbell writes. "Christ held up His arms for a catch." It is a small line,
understated and

almost thrown away (like all those creepy, reaching gloves in The Parasite), but
this sort of

thing is cumulative, and at least suggests Campbell's commitment to the idea that
horror exists

in point of view as well as in incident.

The Doll Who Ate His Mother is not the greatest of the novels discussed here-I

suppose

that would have to be either *The Haunting of Hill House* or Straub's *Ghost Story*-and

it is not

as good as Campbell's *The Parasite* . . . but it is remarkably good. Campbell keeps a

tight rein

on his potentially tabloid-style material, even playing off it occasionally (a dull

and almost

viciously insensitive teacher sits in the faculty room of his school reading a paper

with a

headline which blares HE CUT UP YOUNG VIRGINS AND LAUGHED-the story's blackly

hilarious subhead informs us that His Potency Came From Not Having Orgasms). He

carries

us inexorably past levels of abnormal psychology into something that is much, much

worse.

Campbell is extremely conscious of his literary roots- he mentions Lovecraft (adding

"of

course" almost unconsciously), Robert Bloch (he compares *The Doll's* climax in the

abandoned cellar to the climax of *Psycho*, where Lila Crane must face Norman Bates's

"mother" in a similar basement), and Fritz Leiber's stories of urban horror (such

as "Smoke

Ghost") and more notably, Leiber's eerie novel of San Francisco, *Our Lady of*

Darkness

(winner of the Best Novel award at the 1978 World Fantasy Convention). In *Our Lady*

of

Darkness, Leiber adopts as his thesis the idea that when a city becomes complex

enough, it

may take on a tenebrous life of its own, quite apart from the lives of the people who live and work there-an evil sentience linked, in some unstated way, to the Elder Ones of Lovecraft and, more importantly in terms of the Leiber novel, Clark Ashton Smith. Amusingly, one of the characters in *Our Lady of Darkness* suggests that San Francisco did not become truly sentient until the Transamerica Pyramid was finished and occupied.

While Campbell's *Liverpool* does not have this kind of conscious evil life, the picture he draws of it gives the reader the feeling that he is observing a slumbering, semisentient monster that might awake at any moment. His debt to Leiber seems clearer here than that to Lovecraft, in fact. Either way, Ramsey Campbell has succeeded in forging something uniquely his own in *The Doll Who Ate His Mother*.

James Herbert, on the other hand, comes from an older tradition-the same sort of pulp horror-fiction that we associate with writers such as Robert E. Howard, Seabury

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danse macabre Stephen King Quinn, the early Sturgeon, the early Henry Kuttner, and, on the English side of the Atlantic,

Guy N. Smith.

Smith, the author of paperback originals beyond counting, has written a novel whose title is my

nominee for the all-time pulp horror classic: The Sucking Pit.

This sounds as if I were getting ready to knock Herbert, but this isn't the case.

It's true that

he is held in remarkably low esteem by writers in the genre of both sides of the Atlantic; when

I've mentioned his name in the past, noses have automatically wrinkled (it's little like ringing a

bell in order to watch conditioned dogs salivate), but when you enquire more closely, you find

that remarkably few people in the field have actually read Herbert-and the fact is that James

Herbert is probably the best writer of pulp horror to come along since the death of Robert E.

Howard, and I believe that Conan's creator would have responded to Herbert's work with

immediate enthusiasm, although the two men were opposites in many ways. Howard was big

and broad shouldered; the face in those pictures which remain to us is expressionless with, we

might think, undertones of either shyness or suspicion. James Herbert is of medium height,

slim, quick to smile or frown, open and frank. Of course the biggest difference may be that

Howard is dead and Herbert ain't, ha-ha.

Howard's best work-his stories of Conan the Barbarian-are in the mythic country of Cimmeria, far in a similarly mythic past inhabited by monsters and beautiful, sexy maidens in need of rescue. And Conan will be happy to effect said rescue . . . if the price is right. Herbert's

work is set firmly in England's present, most commonly against the backdrop of London or the southern counties which surround it. Howard was brought up in rural circumstances (he lived

and died in a small sagebrush town called Cross Plains, Texas); Herbert was born in London's

East End, the son of street traders, and his work reflects a checkered career as a rock and roll singer, artist, and ad executive.

It is in the elusive matter of style-a confusing word that may be most accurately defined as

"plan or method of attack"-that Herbert strongly recalls the Howard that was. In his novels of

horror-The Rats, The Fog, The Survivor, The Spear, The Lair, and The Dark-Herbert does

not just write; as Robert E. Howard did, he puts on his combat boots and goes out to assault

the reader with horror.

Let me also take a moment to point out one similarity that James Herbert and Ramsey

Campbell do share, simply by virtue of their Englishness: they both write that clear, lucid, grammatical prose that only those educated in England seem able to produce. You'd think that the ability to write lucid prose would be the bottom line for any publishing novelist, but it is not so. If you don't believe me, go check out the paperback originals rack at your local bookstore. I promise you such a carnival of dangling participles, misplaced modifiers, and even lack of

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danse macabre Stephen King agreement between subject and verb that your hair may turn white. You would expect that proofreaders and copy editors would pick this sort of stuff up even if the writers of such embarrassing English do not, but many of them seem as illiterate as the writers they are trying to bail out.

Worse than the mechanical errors, many writers of fiction seem totally unable to explain simple operations or actions clearly enough for the reader to be able to see them in his or her mind's eye. Some of this is a failure on the writer's part to visualize well and completely; his or her own mind's eye seems bleared half-shut. More of it is a simple failure of that

most basic

writer's tool, the working vocabulary. If you're writing a haunted-house story and

you don't

know the difference between a gable and a gambrel, a cupola and a turret, paneling

and

wainscotting, you, sir or madam, are in trouble.

Now don't get me wrong here; I thought Edwin Newman's book on the degeneration of

the

English language was moderately entertaining but also often tiresome and amazingly

prissy,

the book of a man who would like to put language inside a hermetically sealed

bell-jar (like a

carefully groomed corpse inside a glass coffin) instead of sending it out into the

streets to jive

with the people. But language has its own point and reason for being.

Parapsychologists may

argue over extrasensory perception; psychologists and neurologists may claim there

is no

such thing; but those who love books and love the language know that the printed

word really

is a kind of telepathy. In most cases the writer does her or his work silently,

couching thoughts

in symbols composed of letters in groups set off one from the next by white space,

and in most

cases the reader does her or his work silently, reading the symbols and

reintegrating them as
thoughts and images. Louis Zukofsky, the poet (A, among other books), claimed that
even the
look of words on the page-the indents, the punctuation, the place on the line where
the
paragraph ends-has its own story to tell. "Prose," Zukofsky said, "is poetry."
It's probably true that the writer's thoughts and the reader's thoughts never tally
exactly, that
the image the writer sees and the image the reader sees are never 100 percent the
same. We
are, after all, not angels but were made a little less than the angels, and our
language is
maddeningly hobbled, a fact to which any poet or novelist will attest. There is no
creative
writer, I think, who has not suffered that frustrating crash off the walls which
stand at the limits
of language, who has not cursed the word that just doesn't exist. Emotions such as
grief and
romantic love are particularly hard to deal with, but even such a simple operation
as starting up
a car with a manual transmission and driving it to the end of the block can present
nearly
insurmountable problems if you try to write the process down instead of simply doing
it. And if
you don't believe this is so, write down such instructions and try them on a

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nondriving friend . .

. but check your auto insurance policy first.

Different languages seem particularly suited to different purposes; the French may have

gotten a reputation for being great lovers because the French language seems particularly well

suited to the expression of emotion (there is no nicer way to say it than Je t'aime . . . and no

better language in which to sound really lacked off at someone). German is the language of

explanation and clarification (but it is a cold language for all that; the sound of many people

speaking German is the sound of large machines running in a factory). English serves very

well to express thought and moderately well to express image, but there is nothing inherently

lovely about it (although as someone has pointed out, it has its queerly perverse moments;

think of the lovely and euphonious sound of the words "proctological examination")

. It has

always seemed to me ill suited to the expression of feeling, though. Neither "Why don't we go

to bed together" or the cheerful but undeniably crude "Baby, let's fuck" can touch

"Voulez-vous

coucher avec moi c'est soir?" But we must do the best we can with what we have . . .

and as

readers of Shakespeare and Faulkner will attest, the best we can do is often remarkably good.

American writers are more apt to mangle the language than our British cousins (although I'd

argue with anyone that English English is much more bloodless than American English-many

British writers have the unhappy habit of droning; droning in perfectly grammatical English, but

a drone is still a drone for a' that and a' that), often because they were subjected to poor or

erratic teaching methods as children, but the best American work is striking in a way that

British prose and poetry rarely is anymore: see, for instance, such disparate writers as James

Dickey, Harry Crews, Joan Didion, Ross MacDonald, John Irving.

Both Campbell and Herbert write that unmistakable, impeccable English line; their stories go

out into the world with their pants buttoned, their zippers zipped, and their braces in their

places-but to what a different ultimate effect!

James Herbert comes at us with both hands, not willing to simply engage our attention; he

seizes us by the lapels and begins to scream in our faces. It is not a tremendously artistic

method of attack, and no one is ever going to compare him to Doris Lessing or V. S.

Naipaul . .

. but it works.

The Fog (no relation to the film of the same name by John Carpenter) is a

multiple-viewpoint

story about what happens when an underground explosion breaches a steel cannister

that has

been buried by the British Ministry of Defense. The cannister contains a living

organism called

a mycoplasma (an ominous protoplasm that may remind readers of an obscure Japanese

horror film from the fifties titled The H-Men) which resembles a smoggy yellow-green

mist. Like

rabies, it attacks the brains of the humans and animals it envelops, turning them

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into raving

maniacs. Some of the incidents involving animals are particularly grisly; a farmer

is trampled to

death by his own cows in a foggy pasture, and a drunken shopkeeper who seems to

loathe

everything but his racing pigeons (and one battered old campaigner in particular, a

pigeon

named Claude) has his eyes pecked out by his birds, who have flown back to their

London

coop through the fog. The shopkeeper, clutching the remains of his face, staggers

off the

rooftop where the birds are quartered and falls to his death.

Herbert rarely finesses and never pulls back from the crunch; instead he seems to

race

eagerly, zestfully, toward each new horror. In one scene a crazed bus driver

castrates the

teacher who has been his nemesis with a pair of garden shears; in another, an

elderly poacher

who has been previously caught and "thrashed" by the local large landowner suffers

the

effects of the fog, goes after the landowner, and nails him to his own dining room

table before

finishing him off with an ax. A snotty bank manager is locked in his own vault, a

gym teacher is

beaten to death by his phys ed students, and in the book's most effective scene,

almost a

hundred and fifty thousand residents and holiday-makers at Bournemouth walk into the

ocean

in a massive, lemminglike group suicide.

The Fog was published in 1975, three years before the gruesome events at Jonestown,

Guyana, and in many of the book's episodes-particularly in the Bournemouth episode-

Herbert seems to have forecast it. We see the event through the eyes of a young

woman

named Mavis Evers. Her lesbian lover has just left her, having discovered the joys

of going

hetero, and Mavis has gone to Bournemouth to commit suicide . . . a little irony

worthy of E.C.

comics at their best. She wades breast-deep into the water, becomes frightened, and decides

she will try living a little longer. The undertow nearly gets her, but following a short, tense

struggle, she is able to get to shallow water again. Turning to face the shore,

Mavis is greeted

by this nightmare:

There were hundreds-could it be thousands-of people climbing down the steps to the beach and walking toward her, toward the sea!

Was she dreaming? . . . The people of the town were marching in a solid wall out to the

sea, making no sound, staring toward the horizon as though something was beckoning to

them. Their faces were white, trancelike, barely human. And there were children among

them; some walked along on their own, seeming to belong to no one; those that couldn't

walk were being carried. Most of the people were in their nightclothes, some were naked,

having risen from their beds as though answering a call that Mavis neither heard nor saw . .

. .

This was written before the Jonestown tragedy, remember.

In the aftermath of that, I recall one commentator intoning with dark and solemn

sonorousness, "It was an event that not even the most darkly fertile imagination

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could have

envisioned." I flashed on the Bournemouth scene from *The Fog* and thought, "You're wrong.

James Herbert envisioned it."

. . . still they came on, oblivious to her cries, unseeing. She realized her danger and ran

toward them in a vain attempt to break through, but they forced her back, heedless of her

pleas as she strained against them. She managed to push a short path through them, but

the great numbers before her were unconquerable, pushing her back, back into the waiting

sea

Well, as you've probably guessed, poor old Mavis gets her suicide whether she wants it or

not. And in point of fact, it is explicit scenes of horror and violence like the one just described

which have made Herbert the focus of a great deal of criticism in his native England. He told

me that he finally got sick enough of the "Do you write violence for the sake of violence?"

question to finally blow up at a reporter. "That's right," he said. "I write violence for the sake of

violence, just as Harold Robbins writes sex for the sake of sex, and Robert Heinlein writes

science fiction for the sake of science fiction, and Margaret Drabble writes literature for the

sake of literature. Except no one ever asks them, do they?"

As to how Herbert came to write *The Fog*, he replies: "It's about impossible to remember

where any idea comes from-I mean a single idea may come from many sources. But as clearly as I can recall, the kernel came during a business meeting. I was with an advertising

firm then, and sitting in the office of my creative director, who was a rather dull man. And all of

a sudden it occurred to me: 'What would happen if this man just turned, walked to the window, opened it, and stepped out?' "

Herbert turned the idea over in his mind for some time and finally sat down to do the novel,

spending about eight months' worth of weekends and late nights getting it together.

"The thing

I like best about it," he says, "is that it had no limits of structure or place. It could simply go on

and on until the thing resolved itself. I liked working with my main characters, but

I also liked

the vignettes because when I got tired of what my heroes were up to, I could go off on just

about any tangent I liked. My feeling throughout the writing was, 'I'm just going to enjoy myself.

I'm going to try to go over the top; to see how much I can get away with.' "

In its construction, *The Fog* shows the effect of those apocalyptic Big Bug movies of the late

fifties and early sixties. All the ingredients are there: we have a mad scientist who was

screwing around with something he didn't understand and was killed by the mycoplasma he

invented; the military testing secret weapons and unleashing the horror; the "young scientist"

hero, John Holman, who we first meet bravely rescuing a little girl from the fissure that has

Unleashed the Fog on an Unsuspecting World; the beautiful girlfriend, Casey; the
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obligatory

gathering of scientists, who natter about "the F100 method of fog dispersion" and lament the

fact that carbon dioxide can't be used to disperse the fog because "the organism thrives on it"

and who inform us that the fog is really "a pleuro-pneumonia-like organism."

We will recognize these obligatory trappings of science fiction from such movies as *Tarantula*, *The Deadly Mantis*, *Them!*, and a dozen others; yet we will also recognize that

trappings are all they are, and the heart of Herbert's novel lies not in the fog's

origin or
composition but in its decidedly Dionysian effects-murder, suicide, sexual
aberrations, and all
manner of deviant behavior. Holman, the hero, is our representative from a saner
Apollonian
world, and to do Herbert full justice, he manages to make Holman a good deal more
interesting
than the zeroheroes played by William Hopper, Craig Stevens, and Peter Graves in
various of
the Big Bug films . . . or consider, if you will, poor old Hugh Marlowe in *Earth vs.*
the Flying
Saucers, whose entire set of lines during the last third of the movie seems to
consist of, "Keep
firing at saucer!" and "Fire at saucer until it crashes!"
Nonetheless, our interest in Holman's adventures and whether or not his girlfriend
Casey will
recover from the effects of her own bout with the fog (and what will be her
reaction to the
information that she plunged a scissors into her father's stomach while under the
influence?)
seems pallid when compared to our morbid let's-slow-down-and-look-atthe-accident
interest in
the old lady who is eaten alive by her pet cats or the crazed pilot who crashes his
loaded
jumbo jet into the London skyscraper where his wife's lover works.

I suppose that popular fiction divides itself quite naturally into two halves: what we call "mainstream fiction" and that which I would call "pulp fiction." The pulps, including the so-called "shudder-pulps," of which *Weird Tales* was the finest exponent, have been long gone from the scene, but they live on in the novel and do a brisk business on paperback racks everywhere.

Many of these modern pulps would have been printed as multipart serials in the pulp magazines that existed roughly from 1910 until about 1950, had they been written during that

period. But I wouldn't restrict the label "pulp" simply to genre works of horror, fantasy, science fiction, detective, and western; Arthur Hailey, for instance, seems to me to be writing

modern-day pulp. The ingredients are all there, from the inevitable violence to the inevitable

maiden in distress. The critics who have regularly toasted Hailey over the coals are the same

critics who-infuriatingly enough-see the novel as divisible only into two categories:

"literature," which may either succeed or fail upon its merits, and "popular fiction," which

always fails, no matter how good it may be (every now and then a writer such as John D.

MacDonald may be elevated in the critical mind from a writer of "popular fiction" to

a writer of

"literature," at which point his body of work may be safely reevaluated).

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My own idea is that fiction actually falls into three main categories: literature,

mainstream

fiction, and pulp fiction-and that to categorize does not end the critic's job but

only gives him

or her a place to set his or her feet. To label a novel "pulp" is not the same as

saying it's a bad

novel, or will give the reader no pleasure. Of course we will readily accept that

most pulp fiction

is indeed bad; there is not a great deal one can say in defense of such brass oldies

from the

pulp era as William Shelton's "Seven Heads of Bushongo" or "Satan's Virgin," by Ray

Cummings.* On the other hand, though, Dashiell Hammett published extensively in the

pulps

(most notably in the highly regarded Black Mask, where contemporaries Raymond

Chandler,

James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich also published); Tennessee Williams's first

published

work, a vaguely Lovecraftian tale titled "The Vengeance of Nitocris," appeared in an

early

issue of Weird Tales; Bradbury broke in by way of the same market; so did MacKinlay

Kantor,

who would go on to write Andersonville.

To condemn pulp writing out of hand is like condemning a girl as loose simply because she

comes from unpleasant family circumstances. The fact that supposedly reputable critics both in

the genre and outside it continue to do so makes me both sad and angry. James Herbert is not

a nascent Tennessee Williams only waiting for the right time to spin a cocoon and emerge as a

great figure of modern literature; he is what he is and that's all that he is, as

Popeye would say.

My point is simply that what he is, is good enough. I loved John Jakes's comment on his

*And there's a wonderful story about Erle Stanley Gardner's days in what Frank Gruber used to call the pulp

jungle. At that time the Depression was in full swing and Gardner was writing westerns for a penny a word, selling

to such publications as Western Round-Up, West Weekly, and Western Tales (whose slogan was "Fifteen

Stories, Fifteen Cents"). Gardner admitted that he made a habit of stretching the final shoot-out as far as it would

go. Of course the bad guy finally bit the dust and the good guy strode into the saloon, .44s smoking and spurs

jingling, for a cold sarsaparilla before moving on, but in the meantime, each time Gardner wrote "Bang!" he made

another penny . . . and in those days, two bangs would buy you the daily newspaper.

Bicentennial/ Kent Family saga some years back. He said that Gore Vidal was the Rolls-Royce

of historical novelists; that he himself was more in the Chevrolet Vega class. What Jakes so

modestly left unstated was that both vehicles will get you where you want to go quite

adequately; how you feel about style is between you and you.

James Herbert is the only writer discussed in these pages who is squarely in the pulp

tradition. He specializes in violent death, bloody confrontation, explicit and in some cases kinky

sex, strong and virile young heroes possessed of beautiful girlfriends. The problem which

needs to be solved is in most cases apparent, and the story's emphasis is put

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squarely on

solving that problem. But Herbert works effectively within his chosen genre. He has consistently refused, from the very first, to be satisfied with characters who are nothing more

than cardboard cutouts which he moves around the playing-field of his novel; in most cases we

are given motivations we can identify with and believe in, as in the case of poor, suicide-bound

Mavis. Mavis reflects with a kind of pitiful, deranged defiance that "She wanted

them to know

she had taken her own life; her death, unlike her life, had to have some meaning.

Even if it was

only Ronnie who fully understood that reason." This is hardly stunning character

insight, but it

is fully adequate to Herbert's purposes, and if the ironic outcome is similar to the

ironic

outcome of the tales in E.C.'s series of horror comics, we are able to see more and

thus

believe more, a victory for Herbert which the reader can share. Further, Herbert has

continued

to improve. The Fog is his second novel; those that follow show a gratifying

development in the

writer, culminating perhaps in The Spear, which shows us a writer who has stepped

out of the

pulp arena altogether and has entered the wider field of the mainstream novel.

9

Which brings us to Harlan Ellison . . . and all kinds of problems. Because here it

is

impossible to separate the man from the work. I've decided to close this brief

review of some of

the elements in modern horror fiction by discussing Ellison's work because, although

he

repudiates the label "horror writer," he sums up, for me, the finest elements of the

term.

Closing with Ellison is perhaps almost mandatory because in his short stories of

fantasy and
horror, he strikes closest to all those things which horrify and amuse us (sometimes
both at the
same time) in our present lives. Ellison is haunted by the death of Kitty Genovese-a
murder
that comes up in his "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" and in several of his essays-the
mass
suicides in Jonestown; and he is convinced that Iran's Ayatollah has created a
senile dream of
power in which we are now all living (like men and women in a fantasy tale who
ultimately
come to realize they are living in a psychotic's hallucinations). Most of all, it
seems to me that
Ellison's work is the proper place to conclude because he never looks back; he has
been the
field's point-man for fifteen years now, and if there is such a thing as a fantasist
for the 1980s (
always assuming there are a 1980s, ha-ha), then Harlan Ellison is almost surely that
writer.
He has quite deliberately provoked a storm of controversy over his own work-one
writer in the
field whom I know considers him to be a modern incarnation of Jonathan Swift, and
another
regularly refers to him as "that no-talent son of a bitch." It is a storm that
Ellison lives in quite

contentedly.

"You're not a writer at all," an interviewer once told me in slightly wounded tones.

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"You're a

goddam industry. How do you ever expect serious people to take you seriously if you keep

turning out a book a year?" Well, in point of fact, I'm not "a goddam industry" (unless it's a

cottage industry); I work steadily, that's all. Any writer who only produces a book every seven

years is not thinking Deep Thoughts; even a long book takes at most three years to think and

write. No, a writer who only produces one book every seven years is simply clicking off. But my

own fecundity-however fecund that may be-pales before Ellison's, who has written at a

ferocious clip; at this point he has published just over one thousand short stories.

In addition to

all the stories published under his own name, Ellison has written as Nalrah Nosille, Sley

Harson, Landon Ellis, Derry Tiger, Price Curtis, Paul Merchant, Lee Archer, E. K. Jarvis, Ivar

Jorgensen, Clyde Mitchell, Ellis Hart, Jay Solo, Jay Charby, Wallace Edmondson-and Cordwainer Bird.*

The Cordwainer Bird name is a good example of Ellison's restless wit and his anger

at work

he feels to be substandard dreck. Since the

*All quoted in the Ellison entry by John Clute and Peter Nicholls in The Science

Fiction Encyclopedia. To point

out the obvious, "Nalrah Nosille" is Harlan Ellison spelled backwards. Other names

Ellison used-E. K. Jarvis,

Ivar Jorgensen, and Clyde Mitchell-were so-called house names. In pulp terminology,

a "house name" was the

name of a totally fictional writer who was, nevertheless, extremely prolific . . .

mostly because several (sometimes

dozens) of writers published works under that name when they had another story in

the same magazine. Thus.

"Ivar Jorgensen" wrote Ellison-style fantasy when he was Ellison and sexy,

pulp-style horror, as in the Jorgensen

novel Rest in Agony, when he was someone else (in this case, Paul Fairman). To this

should be added that

Ellison has since acknowledged all of his pseudonomous work, and has published only

under his own name since

1965. He has, he says, a "lemminglike urge to be up front."

early sixties he has done many TV scripts, including produced scripts for Alfred

Hitchcock

Presents, The Man from U.N.C.L.E., The Young Lawyers, The Outer Limits, and what

many

fans feel may have been the best Star Trek episode of them all, "The City on the

Edge of

Forever." * At the same time he was writing these scripts for television

*This may be the longest footnote in history, but I really must pause and tell two more Harlan stories, one apocryphal, the other Harlan's version of the same incident.

The apocryphal, which I first heard at a science fiction bookstore, and later at several different fantasy and science fiction conventions: It was told that Paramount Pictures had a preproduction conference of Big Name

Science Fiction Writers prior to shooting on StarTrek: The Movie. The purpose of the conference was to toss

around ideas for a mission that would be big enough to fly the Starship Enterprise from the cathode tube to the

Silver Screen . . . and BIG was the word that the exec in charge of the conference kept emphasizing. One writer

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suggested that the Enterprise might be sucked into a black hole (the Disney people scoffed that idea up about

three months later). The Paramount exec didn't think that was big enough. Another suggested that Kirk, Speck,

and company might discover a pulsar that was in fact a living organism. Still not big enough, the writer was

admonished; the writers were again reminded that they should think BIG. According to the tale, Ellison sat silent,

doing a slow burn . . . only with Harlan, a slow burn lasts only about five seconds.

Finally, he spoke up. "The

Enterprise," he said, "goes through an interstellar warp, the great-granddaddy of all interstellar warps. It's transported over a googol of light-years in the space of seconds and comes out at a huge gray wall. The wall marks the edge of the entire universe. Scotty rigs full-charge ion Masters which breach the wall so they can see what's beyond the edge of everything. Peering through at them, bathed in an incredible white light, is the face of God Himself."

A brief period of silence followed this. Then the exec said, "It's not big enough. Didn't I just tell you guys to think really BIG?"

In response, Ellison is supposed to have flipped the guy the bird (the Cordwainer Bird, one assumes) and walked out.

Here is Harlan Ellison's recitation of the True Facts:

"Paramount had been trying to get a Star Trek film in work for some time.

Roddenberry was determined that his name would be on the writing credits somehow The trouble is, he can't write for sour owl poop. His one idea, done six or seven times in the series and again in the feature film, is that the crew of the Enterprise goes into deepest space, finds God, and God turns out to be insane, or a child, or both. I'd been called in twice, prior to 1975, to discuss the story. Other writers had also been milked. Paramount couldn't

make up their minds and had
even kicked Gene off the project a few times, until he brought in lawyers. Then the
palace guard changed again at
Paramount and Diller and Eisner came over from ABC and brought a cadre of their . .
. buddies. One of them was
an ex-set designer . . . named A-Park Trabulus.
"Roddenberry suggested me as the scenarist for the film with this Trabulus, the
latest . . . of the know-nothing
duds Paramount had assigned to the troublesome project. I had a talk with Gene . . .
about a storyline. He told me
they kept wanting bigger and bigger stories and no matter what was suggested, it
wasn't big enough. I devised a
storyline and Gene liked it, and set up a meeting with Trabulus for ii December
(1975). That meeting was
canceled . . . but we finally got together on 15 December. It was just Gene
(Roddenberry) and Trabulus and me in
Gene's office on the Paramount lot.
"I told them the story. It involved going to the end of the known universe to slip
back through time to the
Pleistocene period when Man first emerged. I postulated a parallel development of
reptile life that might have
developed into the dominant species on Earth had not mammals prevailed. I postulated
an alien intelligence from
a far galaxy where the snakes had become the dominant life form, and a
snake-creature who had come to Earth
in the Star Trek future, had seen its ancestors wiped out, and who had gone back

into the far past of Earth to set

up distortions in the time-flow so the reptiles could beat the humans. The

Enterprise goes back to set time right,

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finds the snake-alien, and the human crew is confronted with the moral dilemma of

whether it had the right to wipe

out an entire life form just to insure its own territorial imperative in our present

and future. The story, in short,

spanned all of time and all of space, with a moral and ethical problem.

"Trabulus listened to all this and sat silently for a few minutes. Then he said,

`You know, I was reading this

book by a guy named Von Daniken and he proved that the Maya calendar was exactly

like ours, so it must have

come from aliens. Could you put in some Mayans?"

"I looked at Gene; Gene looked at me; he said nothing. I looked at Trabulus and

said, 'There weren't any

Mayans at the dawn of time.' And he said, 'Well, who's to know the difference?' And

I said, "I'm to know the

difference. It's a dumb suggestion.' So Trabulus got very uptight and said he liked

Mayans a lot and why didn't I

do it if I wanted to write this picture. So I said, "I'm a writer. I don't know what

the fuck you are!' And I got up and

walked out. And that was the end of my association with the Star Trek movie."

Which leaves the rest of us mortals, who can never find exactly the right word at

exactly the right time, with

nothing to say but "Right on, Harlan!"

-and winning an unprecedented three Writers Guild of America awards for best dramatic

television scripts in the process-Ellison was engaging in a bitter running battle, a kind of

creative guerilla warfare, with other TV producers over what he regarded as a deliberate effort

to degrade his work and to degrade the medium itself ("to Cuisinart it," in Ellison's own words).

In cases where he felt his work had become so watered down that he no longer wanted his

name on the credits, he would substitute the name of Cordwainer Bird-a name that comes up

again in "The New York Review of Bird" in Strange Wine, a madly amusing story that might

well be subtitled "The Chicago Seven Visit Brentano's."

Cordwainer is an archaic English word for "shoemaker"; so the literal meaning of Ellison's

pen name for scripts which he feels have been perverted beyond any kind of useful life is "one

who makes shoes for birds." It is, I think, as good an explanation as any for the work that

television is engaged in, and suggests quite well the nature of its usefulness.

It is not the purpose of this book to talk about people per se, nor is it the purpose of this

chapter on horror fiction to fulfill a "personal glimpse of the writer" sort of function; that is the job of the Out of the Pages section in People magazine (which my youngest son, with unknowing critical acuity, insists on calling Pimple). But in the case of Harlan Ellison, the man and his work have become so entwined that it is impossible to pull them completely apart.

The book I want to talk about here is Ellison's collection of short fiction, *Strange Wine*

(1978). But each Ellison collection seems built on the collections which have preceded it each

seems to be Ellison's report to the outside world on the subject *This Is Where Harlan Is*

Now. And so it becomes necessary to discuss this book in a more personal way. He demands

it of himself, and while that doesn't specially matter, his work also demands it . .

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. and that does

matter.

Ellison's fiction is and always has been a nervous bundle of contradictions. He's not a

novelist, he says, but he has written at least two novels, and one of them,

Rockabilly (later

retitled *Spider Kiss*), remains one of the two or three best novels ever to be

published about

the cannibalistic world of rock and roll music. He says he's not a fantasist, but

nearly all of his

stories are fantasies. In the course of *Strange Wine*, for instance, we meet a writer

whose work

is done for him by gremlins after the writer himself has gone dry; we also meet a

nice Jewish

boy who is haunted by his mother after she dies ("Mom, why don't you get off my case?"

Lance, the nice Jewish boy in question, asks the ghost desperately at one point; "I saw you

playing with yourself last night," the shade of Mom returns sadly).

In the introduction to the book's most frightening story, "Croatoan," Ellison says he is

pro-choice when it comes to abortion, just as he has said in both his fiction and in his essays

over the last twenty years that he is an affirmed liberal and free-thinker,* but

"Croatoan"-and

most of Ellison's short stories-are as sternly moralistic as the words of an Old

*Ellison Anecdote #2: My wife and I attended a lecture that Harlan gave at the

University of Colorado in the fall

of 1974. He had at that time just finished "Croatoan," the skin-freezer which leads off *Strange Wine*, and he'd had

a vasectomy two days before. "I'm still bleeding," he told the audience, "and my lady can attest that I'm telling the

truth." The lady did so attest, and an elderly couple began to make their way out of

the auditorium, looking a bit

shocked. Harlan waved a cheery goodbye to them from the podium. "Night, folks," he

called. "Sorry it wasn't what

you wanted."

Testament prophet. In many of the out-and-out horror tales there is more than a

whiff of those

Tales from the Crypt/Vault of Horror ghastlies where the climax so often involves

the evildoer

having his crimes revisited upon himself . . . only raised to the tenth power. But

the irony cuts

with a keener blade in Ellison's work, and we have less feeling that rough justice

has been

meted out and the balance restored. In Ell' son's stories, we have little sense of

winners and

losers. Sometimes there are survivors. Sometimes there are no survivors.

"Croatoan" uses that myth of alligators under the streets of New York as its

starting pointsee

also Thomas Pynchon's U. and a funnyhorrible novel called Death Tour by David J.

Michael; this is an oddly pervasive urban nightmare. But Ellison's story is really

about abortion.

He may not be antiabortion (nowhere in his intro to this story does he say he's

pro-abortion,

however), but the story is certainly more sharply honed and unsettling than that

tattered piece

of yellow journalism which all right-to-lifers apparently keep in their wallets or

purses so they

can wave it under your nose at the drop of an opinion-this is the one which purports

to have

been written by a baby while in utero. "I can't wait to see the sun and the

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flowers," the fetus

gushes. "I can't wait to see my mother's face, smiling down at me . . ." It ends, of

course, with

the fetus saying, "Last night my mother killed me."

"Croatoan" begins with the protagonist flushing the aborted fetus down the toilet.

The ladies

who have done the deed to the protagonist's girl friend have packed their d & c

tools and left.

Carol, the woman who has had the abortion, flips out and demands that the

protagonist go and

find the fetus. Trying to placate her, he goes out into the street with a crowbar,

levers up a

manhole cover . . . and descends into a different world.

The alligator story began, of course, as a result of the

give-a-kid-a-baby-alligator-aren't-they-just-the-cutest-little-things craze of the

midfifties. The kid

who got the Bator would keep it for a few weeks, then the tiny alligator would all

of a sudden

not be so tiny anymore. It would nip, perhaps draw blood, and down the toilet it

went. It was

not so farfetched to believe that they might all be down there on the black
underside of our
society, feeding, growing bigger, waiting to gobble up the first unwary sewer
repairman to
come sloshing along in his hipwaders. As David Michael points out in *Death Tour*, the
problem
is that most sewers are much too cold to sustain life in fully grown alligators, let
alone in those
still small enough to flush away. Such a dull fact, however, is hardly enough to
kill such a
powerful image . . . and I understand that a movie which takes this image as its
text is on the
way.

Ellison has always been a sociological sort of writer, and we can almost feel him
seizing
upon the symbolic possibilities of such an idea, and when the protagonist descends
deep
enough into this purgatorial world, he discovers a mystery of cryptic, Lovecraftian
proportions:

At the entrance to their land someone-not the children, they couldn't have done
it-long
ago built a road sign. It is a rotted log on which has been placed, carved from fine
cherrywood, a book and a hand. The book is open, and the hand rests on the book, one
finger touching the single word carved in the open pages. The word is CROATOAN.
Further along, the secret is revealed. Like the alligators of the myth, the fetuses

have not

died. The sin is not so easily gotten rid of. Used to swimming in placental waters,

in their own

way as primitive and reptilian as alligators themselves, the fetuses have survived

the flush and

live here in the dark, symbolically existing in the filth and the shit dropped down

on them from

the society of our overworld. They are the embodiment of such Old Testament maxims

as "Sin

never dies" and "Be sure your sin will find you out."

Down here in this land beneath the city live the children. They live easily and in

strange

ways. I am only now coming to know the incredible manner of their existence. How

they

eat, what they eat, how they manage to survive, and have managed for hundreds of

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years,

these are all things I learn day by day, with wonder surmounting wonder.

I am the only adult here.

They have been waiting for me.

They call me father.

At its simplest, "Croatoan" is a tale of the just Revenge. The protagonist is a

rotter who has

casually impregnated a number of women; the abortion on Carol is not the first one

his friends

Denise and Joanna have performed for this irresponsible Don Juan (although they swear it will be the last). The Just Revenge is that he finds his dodged responsibilities have been waiting for him all along, as implacable as the rotting corpse which so often returned from the dead to hunt down its killer in the archetypical Haunt of Fear story (the Graham Ingles classic "Horror We? How's Bayou?" for instance) .

But Ellison's prose style is arresting, his grasp of this myth-image of the lost alligators seems solid and complete, and his evocation of this unsuspected underworld is marvelous. Most of all, we sense outrage and anger-as with the best Ellison stories, we sense personal involvement, and have a feeling that Ellison is not so much telling the tale as he is jabbing it viciously out of its hiding place. It is the feeling that we are walking over a lot of jagged glass in thin shoes, or running across a minefield in the company of a lunatic. Accompanying these feelings is the feeling that Ellison is preaching to us . . . not in any lackluster, ho-hum way, but in a large, bellowing voice that may make us think of Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." His best stories seem strong enough to contain morals as

well as

themes, and the most surprising and gratifying thing about his short fiction is that

he gets away

with the moralizing; we find he rarely sells his birthright for a plot of message.

It should not be

so, but in his fury, Ellison manages to carry everything, not at a stagger but at a

sprint.

In "Hitler Painted Roses," we have Margaret Thrushwood, whose sufferings make job's

look

like a bad case of athlete's foot. In this fantasy, Ellison supposes-much as Stanley

Elkin does

in *The Living End*-that the reality we experience in the afterlife depends on

politics: namely,

on what people back here think of us. Further, it posits a universe where God (a

multiple God

here, referred to as They) is an imageconscious poseur with no real interest in

right or wrong.

Margaret's lover, a Mr. Milquetoast veterinarian named Doc Thomas, murders the

entire

Ramsdell family in 1935 when he discovers that the hypocritical Ramsdell ("I'll

have no

whores in my house," Ramsdell says when he catches Margaret in the kip with Doc) has

been

helping himself to a bit of Margaret every now and then; Ramsdell's definition of

"whore"

apparently begins when Margaret's sex partner stops being him.

Only Margaret survives Doc's berserk rage, and when she is discovered alive by the townspeople, she is immediately assumed guilty, carried to the Ramsdell well naked, and

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pitched in. Margaret is sent to hell for the crime she is presumed to have committed, while Doc

Thomas, who dies peacefully in bed twenty-six years later, goes to heaven. Ellison's vision of

heaven also resembles Stanley Elkin's in *The Living End*. "Paradise," Elkin tells us, resembles

"a small themepark." Ellison sees it as a place where moderate beauty balances off-but just

barely-moderate tackiness. There are other similarities; in both cases good-nay, saintly!-

people are sent to hell because of what amounts to a clerical error, and in this desperate view

of the modern condition, even the gods are existential. The only horror we are spared is a

vision of the Almighty in Adidas sneakers with a Head tennis racket over His shoulder and a

golden coke-spoon around His neck. All of this comes next year, no doubt.

Before we leave the comparison entirely, let me point out that while Elkin's novel was

heavily and for the most part favorably reviewed, Ellison's story, originally

published in
Penthouse (a magazine not regularly purchased by seekers after literary excellence),
is almost
unknown. Strange Wine itself is almost unknown, in fact. Most critics ignore fantasy
fiction
because they don't know what to do with it unless it is out-and-out allegory. "I do
not choose to
review fantasy," a sometime-critic for no less an organ than the New York Times Book
Review
once told me. "I have no interest in the hallucinations of the mad." It's always
good to be in
contact with such an open mind. It broadens one.

Margaret Thrushwood escapes hell through a fluke, and in his heroically overblown
description of the auguries which foreshadow this supernatural belch, Ellison has an
amusing
whack at rewriting Act I of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Humor and horror are the
original
Chang and Eng of literature, and Ellison knows it. We laugh . . . but there is still
that
undercurrent of unease.

As the smoldering sun passed the celestial equator going north to south, numberless
portents revealed themselves: a two-headed calf was born in Dorset near the little
town of
Blandford; wrecked ships rose from the depths of the Marianas Trench; everywhere,
children's eyes grew old and very wise; over the Indian state of Maharashtra clouds
assumed the shapes of warring armies; leprous moss quickly grew on the south side of

Celtic megaliths and then died away in minutes; in Greece the pretty little
gillyflowers began
to bleed and the earth around their clusters gave off a putrescent smell; all
sixteen of the
ominous dirae designated by Julius Caesar in the first century B.C., including the
spilling of
salt and wine, stumbling, sneezing, and the creaking of chairs, made themselves
apparent;
the aurora australis appeared to the Maori; a horned horse was seen by Basques as it
ran
through the streets of Vizcaya. Numberless other auguries.

And the doorway to Hell opened.

The best thing about the passage quoted above is that we can feel Ellison taking
off,

pleased with the effect and balance of the language and the particulars described,

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pushing it,

having fun with it. Among those who escape hell during the brief period that the
door stands

open are Jack the Ripper, Caligula, Charlotte Corday, Edward Teach ("beard still
bristling but

with the ribbons therein charred and colorless . . . laughing hideously"), Burke and

Hare, and

George Armstrong Custer.

All are sucked back except for Ellison's Lizzie Borden look-alike, Margaret Thrushwood. She makes her way to heaven, confronts Doc . . . and is sent back by God when her realization of the hypocrisy at work causes heaven to begin cracking and peeling around the edges. The pool of water Doc is soaking his feet in when Margaret drags her blackened, blistered body over to him begins to fill up with lava. Margaret returns to hell, realizing that she can take it, while poor Doc, who she still manages somehow to love, could not. "There are some people who just shouldn't be allowed to fool around with love," she tells God in the story's best line. Hitler, meanwhile, is still painting his roses just inside the portal to hell (he has been too absorbed to even think about escape when the door opened). God takes one look, Ellison tells us, and "could not wait to get back to find Michelangelo, to tell him about the grandeur They had beheld, there in that most unlikely of places."

The grandeur Ellison wants us to see, of course, is not Hitler's roses but Margaret's ability to love and to go on believing (if only in herself) in a world where the innocent are punished and

the guilty rewarded. As in most of Ellison's fiction, the horror revolves around some smelly injustice; its antidote lies most frequently in the human ability of his protagonists to surmount the unfair situation, or, lacking that, at least to reach a *modus vivendi* with it. Most of these stories are fables-an uneasy word in a period of literature when the concept of literature is seen to be a simplistic one-and Ellison uses the word frankly in several of his introductions to individual stories. In a letter to me, dated December 28, 1979, he discusses the use of the fable in fantasy fiction that has been deliberately laid against the backdrop of the modern world:

"Strange Wine continues-as I see it in retrospect-my perception that reality and fantasy have exchanged positions in contemporary society. If there is a unified theme in the stories, it is that. Continued from the work I have done in the previous two books, *Approaching Oblivion* (1974) and *Deathbird Stories* (1975) , it tries to provide a kind of superimposed precontinuum by the use and understanding of which the reader who leads even a lightly examined existence can grasp hold of his/her life and transcend his/her fate by understanding it.

"That's all pretty high-flown stuff; but what I mean, simply put, is that the
workaday events

that command our attention are so big, so fantastic, so improbable that no one who
isn't

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walking the parapet of madness can cope with what's coming down.*

*Which reminds me of something that happened at the 1979 World Fantasy Convention. A

UPI reporter asked

me the eternal question: "Why do people read this horror stuff?" My reply was
essentially Harlan's; you try to

catch the madness in a bell-jar so you can cope with it a little better. People who

read horror fiction are warped, I

told the reporter; but if you don't have a few warps in your record, you're going to
find it impossible to cope with

life in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The headline on the UPI squib

that came down the wire and into

newspapers coast to coast was predictable enough, I suppose, and exactly what I
deserved for presuming to

speak metaphorically to a newspaperman: KING SAYS HIS FANS ARE WARPED. Open mouth;

Insert foot;

Close mouth.

"The Tehran hostages, the Patty Hearst kidnapping, the Howard Hughes fake biography
and

subsequent death, the Entebbe raid, the murder of Kitty Genovese, the Jonestown
massacre,

the H-bomb alert in Los Angeles several years ago, Watergate, the Hillside Strangler, the Manson Family, the oil conspiracy: all of them are melodramatic and excessive beyond the ability of a writer of mimetic fiction to capture in fiction without being ridiculous. Yet all of them happened. If you or I were to attempt writing a novel about such things, before the fact, we'd be laughed out of the critical esteem of even the lowliest reviewer.

"I'm not paraphrasing the old saw that truth is stranger than fiction, because I don't see any of these events as mirroring 'truth' or 'reality.' Twenty years ago the very idea of international terrorism would have been inconceivable. Today it's a given. So commonplace that we're unmanned and helpless in the face of Khomeini's audacity. In one fell swoop the man has become the most important public figure of our time. In short, he has manipulated reality simply by being bold. How precise a paradigm he has become for the copelessness of our times. In this madman we have an example of one who understands-even if subcutaneously-that the real world is infinitely manipulable. He has dreamed, and forced the rest of the world to live in that dream. That it is a nightmare for the rest of us

is of no concern to

the dreamer. Cane man's Utopia . . .

"But his example, I suppose, in cathexian terms, is endlessly replicable. And what

he has

done is what I try to do in my stories. To alter everyday existence in a stretch of
fiction

And by the altering, by an insertion of a paradigmatic fantasy element, to permit
the reader to

perceive what she/he takes for granted in the surrounding precept in a slightly
altered way. My

hope is that the frisson the tiny shock of new awareness, the little spark of seeing
the accepted

from an uncomfortable angle, will convince them that there is room enough and time
enough, if

one only has courage enough, to alter one's existence.

"My message is always the same: we are the finest, most ingenious, potentially the
most

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godlike construct the Universe has ever created. And every man or woman has the
ability

within him or her to reorder the perceived universe to his or her own design. My
stories all

speak of courage and ethic and friendship and toughness. Sometimes they do it with
love,

sometimes with violence,, sometimes with pain or sorrow or joy. But they all present

the same

message: the more you know, the more you can do. Or as Pasteur put it, 'Chance

favors the

prepared mind.'

"I am antientropy. My work is foursquare for chaos. I spend my life personally, and

my work

professionally, keeping the soup boiling. Gadfly is what they call you when you are

no longer

dangerous; I much prefer troublemaker, malcontent, desperado. I see myself as a

combination

of Zorro and Jiminy Cricket. My stories go out from here and raise hell. From time

to time some

denigrator or critic with umbrage will say of my work, 'He only wrote that to

shock.'

"I smile and nod. Precisely."

So we find that Ellison's effort to "see" the world through a glass of fantasy is

not really

much different from Kurt Vonnegut's efforts to "see" it through a glass of satire,

semi-science-fiction, and a kind of existential vapidty ("Hi-ho . . . so it goes .

. . how about

that"); or Heller's efforts to "see" it as an endless tragicomedy played out in an

open-air

madhouse; or Pynchon's effort to "see" it as the longest-running Absurdist play in

creation (the

epigram heading the second section of Gravity's Rainbow is from The Wizard of Oz"-I

don't

think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto . . ."; and I think that Harlan Ellison would agree that this

sums up postwar life in America as well as anything else). The essential similarity of these

writers is that they are all writing fables. In spite of varying styles and points of view, the point

in all cases is that these are moral tales.

In the late fifties Richard Matheson wrote a terrifying and utterly convincing tale of a

modern-day succubus (a female sexual vampire). In terms of shock and effect, it is one of the

best tales I've ever read. There is also a succubus tale in *Strange Wine*, but in "Lonely Women

Are the Vessels of Time," the succubus is more than a sexual vampire; she is an agent of

moral forces, come to set things back in balance by stealing the self-confidence of a wretched

man who likes to pick up lonely women in singles bars because they're easy lays. She exchanges her own loneliness for Mitch's potency and when the sexual encounter is done, she

tells him: "Get up and get dressed and get out of here." The story cannot even be described as

sociological, although it has a patina of sociology; it is a moral tale, pure and simple.

In "Emissary from Hamelin," a child piper returns on the booth anniversary of the

abduction

of the children from that medieval town and pipes finis for all of mankind. Here

Ellison's basic

idea, that progress is progressing in an immoral way, seems a bit shrill and

tiresome, an

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unsurprising mating of the Twilight Zone moral stance with that of the Woodstock

Nation (we

can almost hear PA systems blaring, "And don't forget to pick up the garbage."). The

child's

explanation for his return is simple and direct: "We want everyone to stop what they

are doing

to make this a bad place, or we will take this place away from you." But the words

Ellison puts

into his newspaperman-narrator's mouth to amplify the thought smacks a little bit

too much of

Woodsy Owl for me: "Stop paving over the green lands with plastic, stop fighting,

stop killing

friendship, have courage, don't lie, stop brutalizing each other . . ." These are

Ellison's own

thoughts, and fine thoughts they are, but I like my stories without billboards.

I suppose this sort of misstep—a story with a commercial embedded in its center—is

the risk

that all "fable fiction" runs. And perhaps the writer of short stories runs a higher

risk of falling

into the pit than the novelist (although when a novel falls into this pit, the

results are even more

awful; go down to your local library sometime, get a stack permit, and look up some

of the

reporter Tom Wicker's novels from the fifties and sixties-your hair will turn

white). In most

cases Ellison goes around the pit, jumps over it . . . or jumps right into it, on

purpose, avoiding

major injury either by his own talent, the grace of God, or a combination of the

two.

Some of the stories in *Strange Wine* don't fit so comfortably into the fable

category, and

Ellison is perhaps at his best when he is simply goofing with the language, not

playing whole

songs but simply producing runs of melody and feeling. "From A to Z, in the

Chocolate

Alphabet" is such a story (except it is not really a story at all; it is a series of

fragments, some

narrative, some not, that reads more like beat poetry). It was written in the window

of the

Change of Hobbit bookstore in Los Angeles, under circumstances so confusing that

Ellison's

introduction to the piece does not even really do it justice. The individual pieces

produce

individual little ripples of feeling, as good short poems do, and reveal an inspired

playfulness

with the language that is as good a place to conclude all of this as anywhere else,

I suppose.

Language is play to most writers, thoughts are play. Stories are fun, the equivalent of a

child's tug-me-push-me car that makes such an entrancing sound when you roll it across the

floor. So, to close, "From A to Z, in the Chocolate Alphabet," Harlan Ellison's version of the

sound of one hand clapping . . . a sound which only the best fantasy horror fiction can provide.

And set against it, a little something from the work of Clark Ashton Smith, contemporary of

Lovecraft and something much closer to a true poet than Lovecraft could ever hope to be;

although Lovecraft desperately wanted to be a poet, I think the best we can say about his

poetry is that he was a competent enough versifier, and no one would ever mistake one of his

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moody staves for the work of Rod McKuen. George F. Haas, Smith's biographer, suggests that

Smith's finest work may have been *Ebony* and *Crystal*, and this general reader is inclined to

agree, although few readers of modern poetry will find much to like in Smith's
conventional
treatment of his unconventional subject matter. I suspect, though, that Clark Ashton
Smith
would have liked what Ellison is doing in "From A to Z, in the Chocolate Alphabet."

Here,

preceding two selections from the Ellison piece, is a selection from Smith's idea
notebook,
published by Arkham House two years ago as *The Black Book of Clark Ashton Smith*:

The Face from Infinity

A man who fears the sky for some indefinable reason, and tries to avoid the open as
much as possible. Dying at last in a room with short, curtained windows, he finds
himself

suddenly on a vast, bare plain beneath . . . a void heaven. Into this heaven,
slowly, there

arises a dreadful, infinite face, from which he can find no refuge, since all his
senses have

apparently been merged in the one sense of sight. Death, for him, is the eternal
moment in

which he confronts the face, and knows why he has always feared the sky.

Now, the ominous jocularly of Harlan Ellison:

E is for ELEVATOR PEOPLE

They never speak, and they cannot meet your gaze. There are five hundred buildings
in

the United States whose elevators go deeper than the basement. When you have pressed
the basement button and reached the bottom, you must press the basement button twice

more. The elevator doors will close and you will hear the sound of special relays
being
thrown, and the elevator will descend. Into the caverns. Chance has not looked
favorably
on occasional voyagers in those five hundred cages. They have pressed the wrong
button,
too many times. They have been seized by those who shuffle through the caverns, and
they have been . . . treated. Now they ride the cages. They never speak, and they
cannot
meet your gaze. They stare up at the numbers as they light and then go off, riding
up and
down even after night has fallen. Their clothes are clean. There is a special dry
cleaner
who does the work. Once you saw one of them, and her eyes were filled with screams.
London is a city filled with narrow, secure stairways.
And, finally:

H is for HAMADRYAD

The Oxford English Dictionary has three definitions of hamadryad. The first is: a
wood
nymph that lives and dies in her tree. The second is: a venomous, hooded serpent of
India.

The third definition is improbable. None of them mentions the mythic origins of the
word.

The tree in which the Serpent lived was the hamadryad. Eve was poisoned. The wood of
which the cross was made was the hamadryad. Jesus did not rise, he never died. The

ark

was composed of cubits of lumber cut from the hamadryad. You will find no sign of
the

vessel on top of Mt. Ararat. It sank. Toothpicks in Chinese restaurants should be

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avoided at

all costs.

So now . . . tell me. Did you hear it? The sound of one hand clapping in thin air?

10

I began this chapter-one hundred and twenty-four manuscript pages and two months

ago-by saying that it would be impossible to effect an overview of horror fiction

during the last

thirty years without writing a whole book on the subject, and that is as true now as

it was two

months and all those pages ago. All I've been able to do here is to mention some

books in the

genre that I like, and hopefully draw short arrows in the direction these novels and

stories

seem to point. I haven't discussed I Am Legend, but if you should be intrigued

enough to read

The Shrinking Man as a result of what I've said here, you'll probably get to it, and

find

Matheson's unmistakable trademarks on that book as well: his interest in restricting

character

to a single person under pressure so that character can be fully examined, his

emphasis on

courage in adversity, his mastery of terror against what appears to be a normal,

everyday

backdrop. I haven't discussed the work of Roald Dahl or John Collier or Jorge Luis

Borges, but

if you exhaust Harlan Ellison's current stock of offbeat, jivey fantasy, you will

find these others,

and in them you will find many of Ellison's interests repeated, particularly his

examination of

man at his worst, most venal . . . and his best, most courageous and true. To read

Anne Rivers

Siddons's novel of domicile possession may lead you to my novel on the same subject,

The

Shining, or Robert Marasco's brilliant Burnt Offerings.

But a few short arrows is all I can possibly draw. To enter the world of horror

fiction is to

venture, small as a hobbit, through certain mountain passes (where the only trees

which will

grow are undoubtedly hamadryads) and into the equivalent of the Land of Mordor.

This is the

fuming, volcanic country of the Dark Lord, and if the critics who have seen it

firsthand are few,

the cartographers are fewer. This Land is mostly white space on the map . . . which

is how it

should be; I'll leave more detailed map making to those graduate students and

English

teachers who feel that every goose which lays gold must be dissected so that all of its quite

ordinary guts can be labelled; to those figurative engineers of the imagination who cannot feel

comfortable with the comfortably overgrown (and possibly dangerous) literary wilderness until

they have built a freeway composed of Cliff's Notes through it-and listen to me, you people:

every English teacher who ever did a Monarch or Cliff's Notes ought to be dragged out to his

or her quad, drawn and quartered, then cut up into tiny pieces, said pieces to be dried and

shrunk in the sun and then sold in the college bookstore as bookmarks. I'll leave the longer

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arrows to those pharmacists of creativity who cannot feel totally at ease until each tale, created

to hold some reader spellbound as each of us was at one time held spellbound by the story of

Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, or The Hook, has been neatly dehydrated and

poured into a gel capsule to be swallowed. That is their job-the job of dissectors, engineers,

and pharmacists-and I leave it to them, along with the fervent wish that Shelob may

catch

them and eat them as they enter the Dark Lord's land, or that the faces in the Marsh

of the

Dead will first hypnotize them and then drive them mad by quoting Cleanth Brooks to

them

eternally in mud-choked voices, or that the Dark Lord himself will take them up to

his Tower

forever or cast them into the Cracks of Doom, where crocodiles of living obsidian

wait to

crunch up their bodies and silence their quacking, droning voices forever.

And if they avoid all that, I hope they catch poison oak.

My job is done, I think. My grandfather told me once that the best map is one that

points to

which way is north and shows you how much water is in your way. That's the sort of

map I've

tried to provide here. Literary criticism and rhetoric aren't forms I'm comfortable

with, but I'd just

as soon talk books for . . . well, for two months at a time is the way it looks.

Somewhere in the

middle of "Alice's Restaurant," Arlo Guthrie tells his audience, "I could play all

night. I'm not

proud . . . or tired . . ." I could say much the same thing. I haven't talked about

Charles Grant's

Oxrun Station books, or Manley Wade Wellman's Appalachian bard John, he of the

silver-stringed guitar. I've had only a chance to touch briefly on Fritz Leiber's

Our Lady of

Darkness (but gentle reader, there is a pale brown thing in that book that will
haunt your

dreams). There are dozens of others. No, I take that back. There are hundreds.

If you need a slightly longer arrow-or if you're just not tired of talking about
books yetglance

at Appendix II, where there is a list of roughly one hundred books issued
during the

thirty years we've been jawing over here, all of them horror, all of them excellent
in one way or

another. If you're new to the field, you'll find enough stuff to keep you quaking in
your boots for

the next year and a half. If you're not, you'll find you've read many of them
already . . . but

they'll give you my own hazy conception of where north lies, at least.

CHAPTER X

The Last Waltz-Horror and

Morality, Horror and Magic

1

"YES, BUT HOW do you justify earning a living by feeding off people's worst fears?"

2

The police have been summoned by a neighbor who has heard a commotion of some kind.

What they find is a bloodbath-and something worse. The young man admits, quite

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calmly,

that he has murdered his grandmother with a pipe, and then cut her throat.

"I needed her blood," the young man tells the police calmly. "I'm a vampire. Without

her

blood, I would have died."

In his room the police find magazine articles about vampires, vampire comic books,

stories,

novels.

3

We'd been having a pretty nice lunch, this reporter from the Washington Post and I,

something I was grateful for. I'd just started a twelve-city tour for my novel The

Dead Zone the

day before in New York with a kick-off party thrown by the Viking Press at Tavern on

the

Green, a huge, rococo eating and drinking establishment on the edge of Central Park.

I had

tried to take it easy at the party, but I still managed to put away about eight

beers there, and

another six or so at a smaller, more relaxed party with some friends from Maine

later on.

Nevertheless I was up the next morning at quarter of five to make the six o'clock

Eastern

shuttle to Washington so I could, in turn, make a seven o'clock TV appearance to

plug my

novel. Welcome to touring, friends and neighbors.

I made the shuttle handily, telling invisible beads as it took off in a pouring

rainstorm (sitting

next to an, overweight businessman who read the Wall Street Journal through the entire flight

and ate Turns one after another, deliberately and reflectively, as if enjoying them)

and made

A.M. Washington with at least ten minutes to spare. The television lights

intensified the mild

hangover I'd gotten up with, and I was grateful for what had been a fairly laid-back lunch with

the Post reporter, whose questions had been interesting and relatively

unthreatening. Then

this spitball about feeding off people's fears comes out of nowhere. The reporter, a young,

lanky guy, was looking at me over his sandwich, eyes bright.

4

It's 1960, and a lonely Ohio youth has left the movie theater where he has just seen

Psycho

for the fifth time. This young man goes home and stabs his grandmother to death. The pathologist would later count over forty separate stab wounds.

Why? the police asked.

Voices, the young man replies. Voices told me to do it.

5

"Look," I said, putting my own sandwich down. "You take any bigcity psychiatrist.

He's got a

marvelous home in the suburbs, a hundred thousand dollars' worth of house at the very least.

He drives a MercedesBenz, either tobacco-brown or silver-gray. His wife has got a Country

Squire wagon. His kids go to private schools during the academic year and to good summer

camps in New England or in the northwest every summer. Sonny has got Harvard if he can

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make the grades-money is certainly no problem-and his daughter can go to some reet and

complete girls' school where the sorority motto is 'We don't conjugate, we decline.'

And how is

he making the money that produces all of these wonders? He is listening to women weep over

their frigidity, he is listening to men with suicidal impulses, he is dealing with paranoia both

high and low, he's maybe striking on the occasional true schizophrenic. He's dealing with

people who most of all are scared shitless that their lives have somehow gotten out of control

and that things are falling apart . . . and if that isn't earning a living by feeding off people's

fears, I don't know what is."

I picked up my sandwich again and bit into it, convinced that if I hadn't hit the spitter he had

thrown me, I'd at least managed to foul it back and stay alive at the plate. When I
looked up
from my Reuben, the little half-smile on the reporter's face was gone.
"I," he said softly, "happen to be in analysis."

6

January of 1980. The woman and her mother are having a worried conference over the
woman's three-month-old baby. The baby won't stop crying. It always crier. They
agree on the
source of the problem: the baby ha been possessed by a demon, like that little girl
in The
Exorcist. They pour gasoline on the baby as it lies crying in its crib and then
light the child on
fire to drive the demon out. The baby lingers in a burn ward for three days. Then it
dies.

7

The reporter's article was clean and fair for all of that; he was unkind about my
physical
appearance and I suppose he had some cause-I was in the slobbiest shape I've been in
for
ten years during that late summer of 1979-but other than that, I felt I got a pretty
square
shake. But even in the piece he wrote, you can feel the place where his path and
mine
diverged; there is that quiet snap which is the sound of ideas suddenly going off in
two
completely different directions.

"You get the impression that King likes this sort of sparring," he wrote.

8

Boston, 1977. A woman is killed by a young man who uses a number of kitchen implements

to affect the murder. Police speculate that he might have gotten the idea from a movie-Brian

De Palma's Carrie, from the novel by Stephen King. In the film version, Carrie kills her mother

by causing all sorts of kitchen implements-including a corkscrew and a potato-peeler-to fly

across the room and literally nail the woman to the wall.

9

Prime-time television survived the call by pressure groups to end the excessive,

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graphic

depiction of violence on the tube for over ten years and House and Senate

subcommittees

almost without number which were convened to discuss the subject. Private eyes went on

shooting bad guys and getting clopped over the head after the assassinations of John

F.

Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King; you could order up a dose of carnage at the

twist of the channel selector on any night of the week, including Sundays. The

undeclared war

in Vietnam was heating up quite nicely, thank you; body counts were spiralling into the

stratosphere. Child psychologists testified that after watching two hours of violent prime-time

TV, groups of children in the test group showed a marked increase in play aggressivenessbeating

the toy truck against the floor rather than rolling it back and forth, for instance.

10

Los Angeles, 1969. Janis Joplin, who will later die of a drug overdose, it belting out "Ball and

Chain." Jim Morrison, who will die of a heart attack in a bathtub, is chanting

"Kill, kill, kill, kill" at

the end of song titled "The End"-Francis Ford Coppola will use the song ten years later to

fade in the prologue of Apocalypse Now. Newsweek publishes a picture of a shyly-smiling U.S.

soldier holding up a revered human ear. And in a Los Angeles suburb, a young boy puts out

his brother's eyes with his fingers. He was, he explained, only trying to imitate the old Three

Stooges two-fingered boinnng! When they do it on TV, the weeping child explains, no one gets hurt.

11

Television's make-believe violence rolled on nevertheless, through the sixties, past

Charles

Whitman up on the Texas Tower ("There was a rumor/about a tumor," Kinky Friedman and

the

Texas Jewboys sang gleefully, "nestled at the base of his braiyyyn . . ."), and

what finally

killed it and ushered in the Sitcom Seventies was a seemingly unimportant event when

compared to the deaths of a President, a Senator, a great civil rights leader.

Television execs

were finally forced to rethink their position because a young girl ran out of gas in

Roxbury.

She had a gas can in her trunk, unfortunately. She got it filled at a gas station,

and while

walking back to her beached car, she was set upon by a gang of black youths who took

her

gas can away from her, doused her with the gas, and then-like the woman and her

mother

trying to drive the demon out of the baby-lit her on fire. Days later she died. The

youths were

caught, and someone finally asked them the sixty-fourdollar question: Where did you

get such

a horrible idea?

From TV, came the response. From The ABC Movie of the Week.

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Near the end of the sixties, Ed McBain (in reality novelist Evan Hunter) wrote one of his

finest 87th Precinct novels of the policeman's lot. It was called Fuzz, and dealt in part with a

gang of teenagers who went around dousing winos with gasoline and lighting them up.

The

film version, which is described by Steven Scheuer in his invaluable tubeside companion

Movies on TV as a "scatterbrained comedy," starring Burt Reynolds and Raquel Welch.

The

biggest yocks in the movie come when several cops on stakeout dress up as nuns and then

chase after a suspect, holding their habits up to reveal big, clunky workshoes.

Pretty funny,

right, gang? A real gut-buster.

McBain's novel isn't a gut-buster. It's grim and almost beautiful. Certainly he has never come

any closer to defining exactly what the policeman's lot may be than near the end of the novel

when Steve Carella, masquerading as a wino, is lit on fire himself. The producers of the movie

apparently saw something between M*A*S*H and Naked City in this, and the misbegotten result is in most respects as forgettable as a Tracy Stallard fastball . . . except

that one of

Stallard's fastballs went out of Fenway Park to become Roger Maris's record-breaking sixty-first home run. And Fuzz, a poorly executed comedy-drama, effectively ended TV

violence.

The message? You are responsible. And network TV accepted the message.

12

"How do you justify the violence of the shower scene in Psycho?" A critic once asked

Sir

Alfred Hitchcock.

"How do you Justify the opening scene in Hiroshima, Mon Amour?" Hitchcock is reputed

to

have replied. In that opening scene, which was certainly scandalous by American

standards in

1959, we see Emmanuele Riva and Eliji Okada in a naked embrace.

"The opening scene was necessary to the integrity of the film," the critic answered.

"So was the shower scene in Psycho," Hitchcock said.

13

What sort of burden does the writer-particularly the writer of horror fiction-have

to bear in

all of this? Certainly there has never been a writer in the field (with the possible

exception of

Shirley Jackson) who has not been regarded with more than a degree of critical

caution. The

morality of horror fiction has been called into question for a hundred years. One of

the

blood-spattered forerunners of Dracula, Varney the Vampyre, was referred to as a

"penny

dreadful." Later on, inflation turned the penny dreadfuls into dime dreadfuls. In

the 1930s there
were cries that pulps such as *Weird Tales* and *Spicy Stories* (which regularly served
up
lip-smacking S & M covers on which lovely ladies were tied down, always in their
"small
clothes," and menaced by some beastly-but identifiably male-creature of the night)
were
ruining the morals of the youth of America. Similarly in the fifties, the comics
industry choked

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off such outlaw growths as *E.C.'s Tales from the Crypt* and instituted a Comics Code
when it
became clear that Congress intended to clean their house for them if they would not
clean it for
themselves. There would be no more tales of dismemberment, corpses come back from
the
dead, and premature burials-or at least not for the next ten years. The return was
signalled
by the unpretentious birth of *Creepy*, a Warren Group magazine which was a complete
throwback to the salad days of Bill Gaines's *E.C.* horror comics. *Uncle Creepy*, and
his buddy
Cousin Eerie, who came along two years or so later, were really interchangeable with
the Old
Witch and the Crypt-Keeper. Even some of the old artists were back-Joe Orlando, who
made

his debut as an E.C. artist, was also represented in the premiere issue of Creepy,
if memory
serves.

I would suggest that there has always been a great tendency, particularly when it
comes to
such popular forms as movies, television, and mainstream fiction, to kill the
messenger for the
message. I do not now and never have doubted that the youths who burned the lady in
Roxbury got the idea from the telecast of Fuzz one Sunday night on ABC; if it had
not been
shown, stupidity and lack of imagination might well have reduced them to murdering
her in
some more mundane way. The same holds true with many of the other cases mentioned
here.

The danse macabre is a waltz with death. This is a truth we cannot afford to shy
away from.

Like the rides in the amusement park which mimic violent death, the tale of horror
is a chance
to examine what's going on behind doors which we usually keep double-locked. Yet the
human
imagination is not content with locked doors. Somewhere there is another dancing
partner, the
imagination whispers in the night-a partner in a rotting ball gown, a partner with
empty
eyesockets, green mold growing on her elbow-length gloves, maggots squirming in the

thin

remains of her hair. To hold such a creature in our arms? Who, you ask me, would be so mad?

Well . . . ?

"You will not want to open this door," Bluebeard tells his wife in that most horrible of all

horror stories, "because your husband has forbidden it." But this, of course, only makes her all

the more curious . . . and at last, her curiosity is satisfied.

"You may go anywhere you wish in the castle," Count Dracula tells Jonathan Harker, "except where the doors are locked, where of course you will not wish to go." But Harker goes

soon enough.

And so do we all. Perhaps we go to the forbidden door or window willingly because we understand that a time comes when we must go whether we want to or not . . . and not just to

look, but to be pushed through. Forever.

14

Baltimore, 1980. The woman is reading a book and waiting for her bus to arrive. The demobbed soldier who approaches her is a Vietnam vet, a sometime dope addict. He has a

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history of mental problems which seem to date from his period of service. The woman has

noticed him on the bus before, sometimes weaving, sometimes staggering, sometimes

calling

loudly and wildly to people who are not there. "That's right, Captain!" she has heard him say.

"That's right, that's right!"

He attacks the woman as she waits for her bus; later, the police will theorize he was after

drug money. No matter. He will be just as dead, no matter what he was after. The neighborhood is a tough one. The woman has a knife secreted upon her person. In the struggle, she uses it. When the bus comes, the black ex-soldier lies dying in the gutter.

What were you reading? a reporter asks her later; she shows him *The Stand*, by Stephen King.

15

With its disguise of semantics carefully removed and laid aside, what those who criticize the

tale of horror (or who simply feel uneasy about it and their liking for it) seem to be saying is

this: you are selling death and disfigurement and monstrosity; you are trading upon hate and

violence, morbidity and loathing; you are just another representative of those forces of chaos

which so endanger the world today.

You are, in short, immoral.

A critic asked George Romero, following the release of *Dawn of the Dead*, if he felt such a

movie, with its scenes of gore, cannibalism, and gaudy pop violence, was a sign of a healthy

society. Romero's reply, worthy of the Hitchcock anecdote related earlier, was to ask the critic

if he felt the DC-10 engine-mount assembly was a healthy thing for society. His response was

dismissed as a quibble ("You get the impression Romero likes this kind of sparring,"

I can

almost hear the critic thinking).

Well, lets see if the quibble really is a quibble-and lets go one layer deeper than we have

yet gone. The hour has grown late, the last waltz is playing, and if we don't say certain things

now, I suppose we never will.

I've tried to suggest throughout this book that the horror story, beneath its fangs and fright

wig, is really as conservative as an Illinois Republican in a three-piece pinstriped suit; that its

main purpose is to reaffirm the virtues of the norm by showing us what awful things happen to

people who venture into taboo lands. Within the framework of most horror tales we find a moral

code so strong it would make a Puritan smile. In the old E.C. comics, adulterers inevitably

came to bad ends and murderers suffered fates that would make the rack and the boot look

like kiddy rides at the carnival. * Modern horror stories are not much different from the morality plays of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, when we get right down to it. The horror story most generally not only stands foursquare for the Ten Commandments, it blows them up to tabloid size. We have the comforting knowledge when the lights go down in the

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danse macabre Stephen King theater or when we open the book that the evildoers will almost certainly be punished, and measure will be returned for measure.

Further, I've used one pompously academic metaphor, suggesting that the horror tale generally details the outbreak of some Dionysian madness in an Apollonian existence, and that

the horror will continue until the Dionysian forces have been repelled and the Apollonian norm

restored again. Excluding a powerful if puzzling prologue set in Iraq, William Friedkin's film *The*

Exorcist actually begins in Georgetown, an Apollonian suburb if ever there was one.

In the first

scene, Ellen Burstyn is awakened by a crashing, roaring sound in the attic-it sounds like

maybe someone let a lion loose up there. It is the first crack in the Apollonian

world; soon
everything else will pour through in a night
*My all-time favorite (he said affectionately): A crazed husband stuffs the hose of
an air compressor down his
skinny wife's throat and blows her up like a balloon until she bursts. "Fat at
last," he tells her happily just moments
before the pop. But later on the husband, who is roughly the size of Jackie Gleason,
trips a booby-trap she has
set for him and is squashed to a shadow when a huge safe falls on him. This
ingenious reworking of the old story
of Jack Sprat and his wife is not only gruesomely funny; it offers us a delicious
example of the Old Testament
eye-for-an-eye theory. Or, as the Spanish say, revenge is a dish best eaten cold.
mare torrent. But this disturbing crack between our normal world and a chaos where
demons
are allowed to prey on innocent children is finally closed again at the end of the
film. When
Burstyn leads the pallid but obviously okay Linda Blair to the car in the film's
final scene, we
understand that the nightmare is over. Steady state has been restored. We have
watched for
the mutant and repulsed it. Equilibrium never felt so good.
Those are some of the things we've talked about in this book . . . but suppose all
of that is
only a sham and a false front? I don't say that it is, but perhaps (since this is
the last dance) we

ought to discuss the possibility, at least.

In our discussion of archetypes, we've had occasion to discuss the Werewolf, that fellow

who is sometimes hairy and who is sometimes deceptively smooth. Suppose there was a double werewolf? Suppose that the creator of the horror story was, under his/her fright wig and

plastic fangs, a Republican in a three-button suit, as we have said . . . ah, but suppose below

that there is a real monster, with real fangs and a squirming Medusa-tangle of snakes for hair?

Suppose it's all a selfserving lie and that when the creator of horror is finally stripped all the

way to his or her core of being we find not an agent of the norm but a friend-a capering,

gleeful, red-eyed agent of chaos?

What about that possibility, friends and neighbors?

16

About five years ago I finished *The Shining*, took a month off, and then set about

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writing a

new novel, the working title of which was *The House on Value Street*. It was going to be a

roman à clef about the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, her brainwashing (or her sociopolitical

awakening, depending on your point of view, I guess), her participation in the bank robbery,

the shootout at the SLA hideout in Los Angeles-in my book, the hideout was on Value Street,

natch-the fugitive run across the country, the whole ball of wax. It seemed to me to be a

highly potent subject, and while I was aware that lots of nonfiction books were sure to be

written on the subject, it seemed to me that only a novel might really succeed in explaining all

the contradictions. The novelist is, after all, God's liar, and if he does his job well, keeps his

head and his courage, he can sometimes find the truth that lives at the center of the lie.

Well, I never wrote that book. I gathered my research materials, such as they were, to hand

(Patty was still at large then, which was another attraction the idea had for me; I could make up

my own ending), and then I attacked the novel. I attacked it from one side and nothing

happened. I tried it from another side and felt it was going pretty well until I discovered all my

characters sounded as if they had just stepped whole and sweaty from the dance marathon in

Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* I tried it in medias res. I tried to imagine it as

a stage play, a trick that sometimes works for me when I'm badly stuck. It didn't work this time.

In his marvelous novel *The Hair of Harold Roux*, Thomas Williams tells us that writing a long

work of fiction is like gathering characters together on a great black plain. They stand around

the small fire of the writer's invention, warming their hands at the blaze, hoping the fire will

grow into a blaze which will provide light as well as heat. But often it goes out, all light is

extinguished, and the characters are smothered in black. It's a lovely metaphor for the

fiction-making process, but it's not mine . . . maybe it's too gentle to be mine.

I've always seen

the novel as a large black castle to be attacked, a bastion to be taken by force or by trick. The

thing about this castle is, it appears to be open. It doesn't look buttoned up for siege at all. The

drawbridge is down. The gates are open. There are no bowmen on the turrets. Trouble is,

there's really only one safe way in; every other attempt at entry results in sudden annihilation

from some hidden source.

With my Patty Hearst book, I never found the right way in . . . and during that entire six-week

period, something else was nagging very quietly at the back of my mind. It was a news story I had read about an accidental CBW spill in Utah. All the bad nasty bugs got out of their cannister and killed a bunch of sheep. But, the news article stated, if the wind had been blowing the other way, the good people of Salt Lake City might have gotten a very

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nasty surprise. This article called up memories of a novel called Earth Abides, by George R. Stewart.

In Stewart's book, a plague wipes out most of mankind, and the protagonist, who has been made immune by virtue of a well-timed snakebite, witnesses the ecological changes which the passing of man causes. The first half of Stewart's long book is riveting; the second half is more of an uphill push-too much ecology, not enough story.

We were living in Boulder, Colorado, at the time, and I used to listen to the Bible-thumping station which broadcast out of Arvada quite regularly. One day I heard a preacher dilating upon the text "Once in every generation the plague will fall among them." I liked the sound of the phrase-which sounds like a Biblical quotation but is not-so well that I wrote it

down and

tacked it over my typewriter: Once in every generation the plague will fall among them.

This phrase and the story about the CBW spill in Utah and my memories of Stewart's fine

book all became entwined in my thoughts about Patty Hearst and the SLA, and one day while

sitting at my typewriter, my eyes traveling back and forth between that creepy homily on the

wall to the maddeningly blank sheet of paper in the machine, I wrote-just to write something:

The world comes to an end but everybody in the SLA is somehow immune. Snake bit them. I

looked at that for a while and then typed: No more gas shortages. That was sort of cheerful, in

a horrible sort of way. No more people, no more gas lines. Below No more gas shortages I

wrote in rapid order: No more cold war. No more pollution. No more alligator handbags. No

more crime. A season of rest. I liked that last; it sounded like something that should be written

down. I underlined it. I sat there for another fifteen minutes or so, listening to the Eagles on my

little cassette player, and then I wrote: Donald DeFreeze is a dark man. I did not mean that

DeFreeze was black; it had suddenly occurred to me that, in the photos taken during the bank robbery in which Patty Hearst participated, you could barely see DeFreeze's face. He was wearing a big badass hat, and what he looked like was mostly guesswork. I wrote A dark man with no face and then glanced up and saw that grisly little motto again: Once in every generation the plague will fall among them. And that was that. I spent the next two years writing an apparently endless book called The Stand. It got to the point where I began describing it to friends as my own little Vietnam, because I kept telling myself that in another hundred pages or so I would begin to see light at the end of the tunnel. The finished manuscript was over twelve hundred pages long and weighed twelve pounds, the same weight as the sort of bowling ball I favor. I carried it thirty blocks from the U.N. Plaza Hotel to my editor's apartment one warm night in July. My wife had wrapped the entire block of pages in

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Saran Wrap for some reason known only to her, and after I'd switched it from one arm to the

other for the third or fourth time, I had a sudden premonition: I was going to die,
right there on
Third Avenue. The Rescue Unit would find me sprawled in the gutter, dead of a heart
attack,
my monster manuscript, triumphantly encased in Saran Wrap, resting by my
outstretched
hands, the victor.
There were times when I actively hated The Stand, but there was never a time when I
did
not feel compelled to go on with it. Even when things were going bad with my guys in
Boulder,
there was a crazy, joyful feeling about the book. I couldn't wait to sit down in
front of the
typewriter every morning and slip back into that world where Randy Flagg could
sometimes
become a crow, sometimes a wolf, and where the big battle was not for gasoline
allocations
but for human souls. There was a feeling-I must admit it-that I was doing a fast,
happy
tapdance on the grave of the whole world. Its writing came during a troubled period
for the
world in general and America in particular; we were suffering from our first gas
pains in history,
we had just witnessed the sorry end of the Nixon administration and the first
presidential

resignation in history, we had been resoundingly defeated in Southeast Asia, and we were grappling with a host of domestic problems, from the troubling question of abortion-on-demand to an inflation rate that was beginning to spiral upward in a positively scary way. Me? I was suffering from a really good case of career jet lag. Four years before, I had been running sheets in an industrial laundry for \$1.60 an hour and writing Carrie in the furnace-room of a trailer. My daughter, who was then almost a year old, was dressed mostly in scrounged clothes. The year before that, I had married my wife Tabitha in a borrowed suit that was too big for me. I left the laundry when a teaching position opened up at a nearby school, Hampden Academy, and my wife Tabby and I were dismayed to learn that my first-year salary of \$6400 was not going to take us much further than my laundry salary-and pretty soon I'd secured my laundry job back for the following summer. Then Carrie sold to Doubleday, and Doubleday sold the reprint rights for a staggering sum of money which was, in those days, nearly a recordbreaker. Life began to move at Concorde speed. Carrie was bought for films; 'Salem's Lot was bought for a huge sum of money and

then also bought for films; The Shining likewise. Suddenly all of my friends thought I was rich.

That was bad enough, scary enough; what was worse was the fact that maybe I was.

People

began to talk to me about investments, about tax shelters, about moving to

California. These

were changes enough to try and cope with, but on top of them, the America I had grown up in

seemed to be crumbling beneath my feet . . . it began to seem like an elaborate castle of sand

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unfortunately built well below the high-tide line.

The first wave to touch that castle (or the first one that I perceived) was that long-ago

announcement that the Russians had beaten us into space . . . but now the tide was coming in

for fair.

And so here, I think, is the face of the double werewolf, revealed at last. On the surface, The

Stand pretty much conforms to those conventions we have already discussed: an Apollonian

society is disrupted by a Dionysian force (in this case a deadly strain of superflu that kills

almost everybody-). Further, the survivors of this plague discover themselves in two

camp:

one, located in Boulder, Colorado, mimics the

Apollonian society just destroyed (with a few significant changes) ; the other,

located in Las

Vegas, Nevada, is violently Dionysian.

The first Dionysian incursion in *The Exorcist* comes when Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn)

hears that lionlike roar in the attic. In *The Stand*, Dionysus announces himself with the crash of

an old Chevy into the pumps of an out-of-the-way gas station in Texas. In *The Exorcist*, the

Apollonian steady state is restored when we see a pallid Regan MacNeil being led to her

mother's Mercedes-Benz; in *The Stand* I believe that this moment comes when the book's two

main characters, Stu Redman and Frannie Goldsmith, look through a plate-glass window in the

Boulder hospital at Frannie's obviously normal baby. As with *The Exorcist*, the return of

equilibrium never felt so good.

But below all of this, hidden by the moral conventions of the horror tale (but perhaps not all

that hidden), the face of the real Werewolf can be dimly seen. Much of the compulsion I felt

while writing *The Stand* obviously came from envisioning an entire entrenched societal process

destroyed at a stroke. I felt a bit like Alexander, lifting his sword over the
Gordian knot and
growling, "Fuck untying it; I've got a better way." And I felt a bit the way Johnny
Rotten sounds
at the beginning of that classic and electrifying Sex Pistols song, "Anarchy for the
U.K." He
utters a low, throaty chuckle that might have come from Randall Flagg's own throat
and then
intones, "Right . . . NOW!" we hear that voice, and our reaction is one of intense
relief. The
worst is now known; we are in the hands of an authentic madman.
In this frame of mind, the destruction of THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT became an actual
relief. No more Ronald McDonald! No more Gong Show or Soap on TV-just soothing snow!
No more terrorists! No more bullshit.' Only the Gordian knot unwinding there in the
dust. I am
suggesting that below the writer of the moral horror tale (whose feet, like those of
Henry Jekyll,
are "always treading the upward path") there lies another creature altogether. He
lives, let us
say, down there on Jack Finney's third level, and he is a capering nihilist who, to
extend the
Jekyll-Hyde metaphor, is not content to tread over the tender bones of one screaming
little girl
but in this case feels it necessary to do the funky chicken over the whole world.

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Yes, folks, in

The Stand I got a chance to scrub the whole human race, and it was fun!

So where is morality now?

Well, I'll give you my idea. I think it lies where it has always lain: in the hearts

and minds of

men and women of good will. In the case of the writer, this may mean beginning with

a nihilistic

premise and gradually relearning old lessons of human values and human conduct. In

the case

of The Stand, this meant beginning with the glum premise that the human race carries

a kind

of germ with it-I began by seeing this germ symbolically visualized in the SLA, and

ended by

seeing it visualized in the superflu germ-which grows more and more virulent as

technology

grows in power. The superflu is unleashed by a single technological misstep (not

such a

far-fetched presumption, either, when you consider what happened at Three Mile

Island last

year or the fact that Loring AFB in my own state scrambled bombers and fighters

ready to

head over the pole toward Russia as the result of an amusing little computer foulup

which

suggested that the Russians had launched their missiles and the Big Hot One was on).

By

simple agreement with myself to allow a few survivors-no survivors, no story, am I right?-I

was able to envision a world in which all the nuclear stockpiles would simply rust away and

some kind of normal moral, political, and ecological balance would return to the mad universe

we call home.

But I don't think anyone knows what they really think-or perhaps even what they really

know-until it's written down, and I came to realize that the survivors would be very likely to

first take up all the old quarrels and then all the old weapons. Worse, all those deadly toys

would be available to them, and things might well become a sprint to see which group of

loonies could figure out how to launch them first. My own lesson in writing *The Stand* was that

cutting the Gordian Knot simply destroys the riddle instead of solving it, and the book's last line

is an admission that the riddle still remains.

The book also tries to celebrate brighter aspects of our lives: simple human courage,

friendship, and love in a world which so often seems mostly loveless. In spite of its apocalyptic

theme, *The Stand* is mostly a hopeful book that echoes Albert Camus's remark that

"happiness, too, is inevitable."

More prosaically, my mother used to tell my brother David and I to "hope for the best and expect the worst," and that expresses the book I remember writing as well as anything.

So, in short, we hope for a fourth level (a triple Werewolf?), one that will bring us full circle

again to the horror writer not just as writer but as human being, mortal man or woman, just

another passenger in the boat, another pilgrim on the way to whatever there is. And we hope

that if he sees another pilgrim fall down that he will write about it-but not before he or she has

helped the fallen one of his or her feet, brushed off his or her clothes, and seen

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if he or she is

all right, and able to go on. If such behavior is to be, it cannot be as a result of an intellectual

moral stance; it is because there is such a thing as love, merely a practical fact, a practical

force in human affairs.

Morality is, after all, a codification of those things which the heart understands to be true and

those things which the heart understands to be the demands of a life lived among others . . .

civilization, in a word. And if we remove the label "horror story" or "fantasy genre" or whatever, and replace it with "literature" or more simply still, "fiction," we may realize more easily that no such blanket accusations of immorality can be made. If we say that morality proceeds simply from a good heart-which has little to do with ridiculous posturings and happily-ever-afterings-and immorality proceeds from a lack of care, from shoddy observation, and from the prostitution of drama or melodrama for some sort of gain, monetary or otherwise, then we may realize that we have arrived at a critical stance which is both workable and humane. Fiction is the truth inside the lie, and in the tale of horror as in any other tale, the same rule applies now as when Aristophanes told his horror tale of the frogs: morality is telling the truth as your heart knows it. When asked if he was not ashamed of the rawness and sordidness of his turn-of-the-century novel *McTeague*, Frank Norris replied: "Why should I be? I did not lie. I did not truckle. I told them the truth."

Seen in that light, I think the horror tale may more often be adjudged innocent than guilty.

My, look at this . . . I do believe the sun is coming up. We have danced the night
away, like
lovers in some old MGM musical. But now the band has packed their melodies back
inside
their cases and has quitted the stage. The dancers have left, all but you and I, and
I suppose
we must go, as well. I cannot tell you how much I've enjoyed the evening, and if you
sometimes found me a clumsy partner (or if I occasionally stepped on your toes), I
do
apologize. I feel as I suppose all lovers feel when the dance has finally ended,
tired . . . but still
gay.

As I walk you to the door, may I tell you one more thing? We'll stand here in the
vestibule as
they unroll the rug again and douse the lights. Let me help you with your coat; I'll
not keep you
long.

Questions of morality in the pursuit of horror may be begging the actual question.

The

Russians have a phrase, "the scream of the woodcock." The phrase is derisory because
the

woodcock is nature's ventriloquist, and if you fire your shotgun at tile place where
the sound

came from, you'll go hungry. Shoot the woodcock, not the scream, the Russians say.

So let's see if we can't find a woodcock-just one-in all these screaming thickets.

It might

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just be hiding in this item, truth rather than fiction, from The Book of Lists, the

Wallace/

Wallechinsky clan's attic full of fascinating rickrack and useful junk. As you get

ready to leave,

think about this . . . or brood upon it:

THE MYSTERY OF LITTLE MISS NOBODY

On July 6, 1944, the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus was giving a performance in Hartford, Connecticut, before 7,000 paid customers. A fire broke out;

168

persons died in the blaze and 487 were injured. One of the dead, a small girl

thought to be

six years old, was unidentified. Since no one came to claim her, and since her

face was

unmarred, a photograph was taken of her and distributed locally and then throughout

the

U.S. Days passed, weeks and months passed, but no relative, no playmate, no one in

the

nation came forward to identify her. She remains unknown to this day.

My idea of growing up is that the process consists mainly of developing a good case

of

mental tunnel vision and a gradual ossification of the imaginative faculty (what

about Little Miss

Nobody, you ask me—well, hang on; we'll get there). Children see everything,

consider

everything; the typical expression of the baby which is full, dry, and awake is a

vide-eyed

goggle at everything. Hello, pleased to meet you, freaked to be here. A child has

not yet

developed the obsessional behavior patterns which we approvingly call "good work

habits." He

or she has not yet internalized the idea that a straight line is the shortest

distance between two

points.

All of that comes later. Children believe in Santa Claus. It's no big deal; just a

piece of stored

information. They likewise believe in the boogeyman, the Trix Rabbit, McDonaldland

(where

hamburgers grow on trees and moderate thievery is approved behavior-witness the

lovable

Hamburglar), the Tooth Fairy who takes ivory and leaves silver . . . all of these

things are taken

as a matter of course. These are some of the popular myths; there are others which,

while

more specialized, seem just as outré. Grampa leas gone to live with the angels. The

stuff in

the middle of the golf ball is the worst poison in the world. Step on a crack, break

your mother's

back. If you walk through holly bushes, your shadow can get caught and it will be

left there

forever, flapping on the sharp leaves.

The changes come gradually, as logic and rationalism assert themselves. The child

begins

to wonder how Santa can be at the Value House, on a downtown corner ringing a bell

over a

Salvation Army pot, and up at the North Pole generaling his troop of elves all at

the same time.

The child maybe realizes that although lie's stepped on a hell of a lot of cracks,

his or her

mother's back is yet all right. Age begins to settle into that child's face. "Don't

be a baby!" lie or

she is told impatiently. "Your head is always in the clouds!" And the kicker, of

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course: "Aren't

you ever going to grow up?"

After awhile, tile song says, Puff the magic dragon stopped trundling his way up the

Cherry

Lane to see his old goodbuddy Jackie Paper. Wendy and her brothers finally left

Peter Pan

and the Wild Boys to their fate. No more Magic Dust and only an occasional Happy

Thought . .

. but there was always something a little dangerous about Peter Pan, wasn't there?

Something

just a little too woodsy-v,ild? Something in his eyes that was . . . well, downright

Dionysian.

Oh, the gods of childhood are immortal; tile big kids don't really sacrifice them;
they just

pass them on to their bratty kid brothers and kid sisters. It's childhood itself
that's mortal: man

is in love, and loves what passes. And it's not just Puff and Tink and Peter Pan
that are left

behind in that rush for the driver's license, the high school and college diploma,
in that mostly

eager training to achieve "good work habits." We have each exiled the Tooth Fairy
(or perhaps

he exiles us when we are no longer able to provide the product he requires),
murdered Santa

Claus (only to reanimate the corpse for our own children), killed the giant that
chased Jack

down the beanstalk. And the poor old boogeyman! Laughed to death again and again,
like Mr.

Dark at the conclusion of Something Wicked This Way Comes.

Listen to me now: At eighteen or twenty or twenty-one, whatever the legal drinking
age may

be in your state, "getting carded" is something of an embarrassment. You have to
fumble

around for a driver's license or your State Liquor Card or maybe even a photostat of
your birth

certificate so you can get a simple fa' Chrissakes glass of beer. But you let ten
years go past,

get so you are looking the big three-o right in the eye, and there is something
absurdly

flattering about getting carded. It means you still look like you might not be old
enough to buy a
drink over the bar. You still look a little wet behind the ears. You still look
young.

This got into my head a few years ago when I was in a bar called Benjamin's in
Bangor,

getting pleasantly loaded. I began to study the faces of entering patrons. The guy
standing

unobtrusively by the door let this one pass . . . and that one . . . and the next
one. Then, bang!

He stopped a guy in a U of M jacket and carded him. And I'll be damned if that guy
didn't do a

quick fade. The drinking age in Maine was then eighteen (booze-related accidents on
the

highways have since caused the lawmakers to move the age up to twenty), and all of
those

people had looked about eighteen to me. So I got up and asked the bouncer how he
knew that

last guy was underage. He shrugged. "You just know," he said. "It's mostly in their
eyes."

For weeks after, my hobby was looking at the faces of adults and trying to decide
exactly what

it was that made them "adult faces." The face of a thirty -year-old is healthy,

unwrinkled, and no

bigger than the face of a seventeen-year-old. Yet you know that's no kid; you know.

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There

seems to be some hidden yet overriding characteristic that makes what we all agree

is the

Adult Face. It isn't just the clothes or the stance, it isn't the fact that the

thirty -year-old is toting

a briefcase and the seventeen-year-old is toting a knapsack; if you put the head of

each in one

of those carnival cut-outs which show the body of a capering sailor or a

prize-fighter, you could

still pick out the adult ten tries out of ten.

I came to believe that the bouncer was right. It's in the eyes.

Not something that's there; something, rather, that has left.

Kids are bent. They think around corners. But starting at roughly age eight, when

childhood's second great era begins, the kinks begin to straighten out, one by one.

The

boundaries of thought and vision begin to close down to a tunnel as we gear up to

get along.

At last, unable to grapple to any profit with Never-Never Land anymore, we may

settle for the

minor-league version available at the local disco . . . or for a trip to Disney

World one February

or March.

The imagination is an eye, a marvelous third eye that floats free. As children, that eye sees
with 20/20 clarity. As we grow older, its vision begins to dim . . . and one day the
guy at the
door lets you into the bar without asking to see any ID and that's it for you,
Cholly; your hat is
over the windmill. It's in your eyes. Something in your eyes. Check them out in the
mirror and
tell me if I'm wrong.

The job of the fantasy writer, or the horror writer, is to bust the walls of that
tunnel vision

wide for a little while; to provide a single powerful spectacle for that third eye.

The job of the
fantasy-horror writer is to make you, for a little while, a child again.

And the horror writer himself /herself? Someone else looks at that item about Little
Miss

Nobody (toldja we'd get back to her, and here she is, still unidentified, as
mysterious as the

Wolf Boy of Paris) and says, "Jeez, you never can tell, can you?" and goes on to
something

else. But the fantasist begins to play with it as a child would, speculating about
children from

other dimensions, about doppelgangers, about God knows what. It's a child's toy,
something

bright and shiny and strange. Let us pull a lever and see what it does, let us push

it across the
floor and see if it goes Rum-Rum-Rum or wacka-wacka-wacka. Let us turn it over and
see if it
will magically right itself again. In short, let us have our Fortian rains of frogs
and people who
have mysteriously burned to death while sitting at home in their easy chairs; let us
have our
vampires and our werewolves. Let us have Little Nobody, who perhaps slipped sideways
through a crack in reality, only to be trampled to death in the rush from a burning
circus tent.

And something of this is reflected in the eyes of those who write horror stories.

Ray

Bradbury has the dreamy eyes of a child. So, behind his thick glasses, does Jack
Finney. The
same look is in Lovecraft's eyes-they startle with their simple dark directness,
especially in

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that narrow, pinched, and somehow eternal New England face. Harlan Ellison, in spite
of his
rapid jive-talking shoot-from-the-hip Nervous-Norvus mode of conversation (talking
with Harlan
can sometimes be like talking with an apocalyptic Saladmaster salesman who has just
taken
three large bennies), has those eyes. Every now and then he'll pause, looking away,
looking at

something else, and you know that it's true: Harlan is bent, and he just thought his way around

a corner. Peter Straub, who dresses impeccably and who always seems to project the aura of

some big company success, also has that look in his eyes. It is an indefinable look,

but it's

there.

"It's the best set of electric trains a boy ever had," Orson Welles once said of

making

movies; the same can be said of making books and stories. Here is a chance to bust

that

tunnel vision wide open, bricks flying everywhere so that, for a moment at least, a

dreamscape

of wonders and horrors stands forth as clearly and with all the magic reality of the

first Ferris

wheel you ever saw as a kid, turning and turning against the sky. Someone's dead son

is on

the late movie. Somewhere a foul man-boogeyman!-is slouching through the snowy night

with shining yellow eyes. Boys are thundering through autumn leaves on their way

home past

the library at four in the morning, and somewhere else, in some other world, even as

I write

this, Frodo and Sam are making their way toward Mordor, where the shadows lie. I am

quite

sure of it.

Ready to go? Fine. I'll just grab my coat.

It's not a dance of death at all, not really. There is a third level here, as well.

It is, at bottom,

a dance of dreams. It's a way of awakening the child inside, who never dies but only
sleeps

ever more deeply. If the horror story is our rehearsal for death, then its strict
moralities make it

also a reaffirmation of life and good will and simple imagination-just one more
pipeline to the

infinite.

In his epic poem of a stewardess falling to her death from high above the fields of
Kansas,

James Dickey suggests a metaphor for the life of the rational being, who must
grapple as best

he/she can with the fact of his/her own mortality. We fall from womb to tomb, from
one

blackness and toward another, remembering little of the one and knowing nothing of
the other .

. . . except through faith. That we retain our sanity in the face of these simple yet
blinding

mysteries is nearly divine. That we may turn the powerful intuition of our
imagination upon

them and regard them in this glass of dreams-that we may, however timidly, place our
hands

within the hole which opens at the center of the column of truth-that is . . .

. . . well, it's magic, isn't it?

Yeah. I think maybe that's-,what I want to leave you,-with, in lieu of a goodnight
kiss, that

Nword which children respect instinctively, that word whose truth we only rediscover
as adults

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in our stories . . . and in our dreams:

Magic.

Afterword

IN JULY OF 1977, my wife and I hosted a gathering of my wife's entire family-a giant
collection of sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and millions of kids. My wife spent
most of that

week cooking and of course what always happens at family gatherings happened at this
one:

everybody brought a casserole. Much food was eaten on the shores of Long Lake that
sunny

summer day; many cans of beer were consumed. And when the crowd of Spruces and
Atwoods and LaBrees and Graveses and everyone else had departed, we were left with
enough food to feed an army regiment.

So we ate leftovers.

Day in, day out, we ate leftovers. And when Tabby brought out the remains of the
turkey for

the fifth or sixth time (we had eaten turkey soup, turkey surprise, and turkey with
noodles; this

day it was something simpler, nice, nourishing turkey sandwiches), my son Joe, who

was then

five, looked at it and screamed: "Do we have to eat this shit again?"

I didn't know whether to laugh or clout him upside the head. As I recall, I did both.

I told you that story because people who have read a lot of my work will realize that they

have eaten a few leftovers here. I have used material from my introduction to Night Shift, from

my introduction to the New American Library's omnibus edition of Frankenstein, Dracula, and

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide, from an article entitled "The Fright Report," originally published in Oui

magazine, from an article called "The Third Eye" in The Writer; much of the material on

Ramsey Campbell originally appeared in Stuart Schiff's Whispers magazine.

Now before you decide to clout me upside the head or to scream "Do we have to eat this shit

again?" let me point out to you what my wife pointed out to my son on the day of the turkey

sandwiches: there are hundreds of different recipes for turkey, but they all taste like turkey.

And coupled with that, she said, it is a shame to waste good things.

This is not to say that my article in Oui was so paralyzingly great or that my thoughts on

Ramsey Campbell were so deathless that they deserved to be preserved in a book; it is only to

say that, while my thoughts and feelings on the genre I've spent most of my life working in may have evolved or shifted somewhat in perspective, they haven't really changed. That change may come, but since there has only been a passage of four years since I originally stated many of my feelings about horror and terror in the Night Shift introduction, it would be surprising-even suspect-if I were to suddenly deny everything I had written previous to this book.

In my own defense, I'll add that Danse Macabre gave me the space to develop some of these ideas in more detail than I had ever been given before, and for that I must thank Bill

Thompson and Everest House. In no case did I simply reheat something I had written before; I

tried as hard as I could to develop each idea as fully as possible without beating

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it into the

ground. In some cases, I may have done just that, though, and all I can do in such cases is to

beg your indulgence.

And I think that really is the end. Thank you again for coming with me, and rest you well.

But, being who I am and what I am, I cannot find it in my heart to wish you pleasant dreams . .

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APPENDICES

AND

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APPENDIX I

THE FILMS

Below is a list of roughly one hundred fantasy/horror films tied together by their time and their

excellence. All were released during the period 1950-1980, and all of them seem to me to be

particularly interesting in one way or another; if I may say so without sounding like an Academy

Awards presenter, all of them have contributed something of value to the genre. You will find

my own personal favorites marked with an asterisk (*). Special thanks are due to Kirby

McCauley, who provided invaluable help with the list.

TITLE DIRECTOR YEAR

The Abominable Dr. Phibes Robert Fuest 1971

*Alien Ridley Scott 1979

Asylum Roy Ward Baker 1972

The Bad Seed Mervyn LeRoy 1956

The Birds Alfred Hitchcock 1963

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage Dario Argento 1969

*Black Sunday Mario Bava 1961

*The Brood David Cronenberg 1979

Burnt Offerings Dan Curtis 1976

Burn Witch Burn Sidney Hayers 1962

*The Cage Walter Graumann 1961

*Carrie Brian De Palma 1976

The Conqueror Worm Michael Reeves 1968

*Creature from the Black Lagoon Jack Arnold 1954

*The Creeping Unknown Val Guest 1955

*Curse of the Demon Jacques Tourneur 1957

The Day of the Triiffids Steve Sekely 1963

*Dawn of the Dead George A. Romero 1979

The Deadly Beer Freddie Francis 1967

Deep Red Dario Argento ?

*Deliverance John Boorman 1972

*dementia-13 Francis Coppola 1963

Diabolique Henri-Georges Clouzot 1955

Doctor Terror's House of Horrors Freddie Francis 1965

Don't Look Now Nicholas Roeg 1973

*Duel Steven Spielberg 1971

*Enemy from Space Val Guest 1957

Eraserhead David Lynch 1978

*The Exorcist William Friedkin 1973

The Exterminating Angel Luis Bunuel 1963

Eye of the Cat David Lowell Rich 1969

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The Fly Kurt Neumann 1958

*Frenzy Alfred Hitchcock 1972

The Fury Brian De Palma 1978

Gorgo Eugene Lourie 1961

*Halloween John Carpenter 1978

*The Haunting Robert Wise 1963

The H-Man Inoshiro Honda 1958

Horrors of the Black Museum Arthur Crabtree 1959

Hour of the Wolf Ingmar Bergman 1967

The House that Dripped Blood Peter Duffell 1970

Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte Robert Aldrich 1965

*I Bury the Living Albert Band 1958

The Incredible Shrinking Man Jack Arnold 1957

*Invasion of the Body Snatchers Don Siegel 1956

Invasion of the Body Snatchers Philip Kaufman 1978

I Saw What You Did William Castle 1965

*It Came from Outer Space Jack Arnold 1953

It! The Terror from Beyond Space Edward L. Cahn 1958

*Jaws Steven Spielberg 1975

The Killer Shrews Ken Curtis 1959

Last Summer Frank Perry 1969

*Let's Scare Jessica to Death John Hancock 1971

Macabre William Castle 1958

*Martin George A. Romero 1977

The Masque of the Red Death Roger Corman 1964

Night Must Fall Karel Reisz 1964

*The Night of the Hunter Charles Laughton 1955

*Night of the Living Dead George A. Romero 1968

Not of This Earth Roger Corman 1956

No Way to Treat a Lady Jack Smight 1968

Panic in the Year Zero Ray Milland 1962

*Picnic at Hanging Rock Peter Weir 1978

The Pit and the Pendulum Roger Corman 1961

*Psycho Alfred Hitchcock 1960

*Rabid David Cronenberg 1976

Race with the Devil Jack Starrett 1975

*Repulsion Roman Polanski 1965

*Rituals ? 1978

*Rosemary's Baby Roman Polanski 1968

Salem's Lot Tobe Hooper 1979

Seance on a Wet Afternoon Bryan Forties 1964

Seizure Oliver Stone 1975

*The Seventh Seal Ingmar Bergman 1956

*Sisters Brian De Palma 1973

*The Shining Stanley Kubrick 1980

The Shout Jerzy Skolimowski 1979

Someone's Watching Me John Carpenter 1978

The Stepford Wives Bryan Forties 1975

Strait-Jacket William Castle 1964

Suddenly Last Summer Joseph L. Mankiewicz 1960

*Suspiria Dario Argento 1977

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Tobe Hooper 1974

*Them! Gordon Douglas 1954

They Came from Within David Cronenberg 1975

*The Thing Christian Nyby 1951

The Tomb of Ligeia Roger Corman 1965

Trilogy of Terror Dan Curtis 1975

Village of the Damned Wolf Rilla 1960

*Wait Until Dark Terence Young 1967

*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? Robert Aldrich 1961

When Michael Calls Philip Leacock 1971

The Wicker Man Robin Hardy 1973

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Willard Daniel Mann 1971

*X-the Man with the X-Ray Eyes Roger Corman 1963

X the Unknown Leslie Norman 1956

APPENDIX 2

THE BOOKS

Below is a list of roughly one hundred books-novels and collections-which span the period

we have been discussing. They are listed alphabetically according to author. As with my list of

films, you may not find all of these to your taste, but all seem-to me, at least-important to

the genre we have been discussing. Thanks again to Kirby McCauley, who helped with the list,

and a special tip of the hat to "Fast Eddie" Melder, who owns a pub in North Lovell and who

put up with our wild talk until well past closing time.

Once again, I've marked with an asterisk (*) books which I felt were particularly important.

Richard Adams. The Plague Dogs; Watership Down*

Robert Aickman. Cold Hand in Mine; Painted Devils

Marcel Ayme. The Walker through Walls

Beryl Bainbridge. Harriet Said

J. G. Ballard. Concrete Island*; High Rise

Charles Beaumont. Hunger*; The Magic Man

Robert Bloch. Pleasant Dreams*; Psycho*

Ray Bradbury. Dandelion Wine; Something Wicked This Way Comes*; The October Country

Joseph Payne Brennan. The Shapes of Midnight*

Frederic Brown. Nightmares and Geezenstacks*

Edward Bryant. Among the Dead

Janet Caird. The Loch

Ramsey Campbell. Demons By Daylight; The Doll Who Ate His Mother*; The Parasite*

Suzy McKee Charnas. The Vampire Tapestry

Julio Cortazar. The End of the Game and Other Stories

Harry Crews. A Feast of Snakes

Roald Dahl. Kiss Kiss*; Someone Like You*

Les Daniels. The Black Castle

Stephen R. Donaldson. The Thomas Covenant Trilogy (3 vols.)*

Daphne Du Maurier. Don't Look Now

Harlan Ellison. Deathbird Stories*; Strange Wine*

John Farris. All Heads Turn When the Hunt Goes By

Charles G. Finney. The Ghosts of Manacle

Jack Finney. The Body Snatchers*; I Love Galesburg in the Springtime; The Third Level*;

Time and Again*

William Golding. Lord of the Flies*

Edward Gorey. Amphigorey; Amphigorey Too

Charles L. Grant. The Hour of the Oxrun Dead; The Sound of Midnight*

Davis Grubb. Twelve Tales of Horror*

William H. Hallahan. The Keeper of the Children; The Search for Joseph Tully

James Herbert. The Fog; The Spear*; The Survivor

William Hjortsberg. Falling Angel*

Shirley Jackson. The Haunting of Hill House*; The Lottery and Others*; The Sundial

Gerald Kersh. Men Without Bones*

Russell Kirk. The Princess of All Lands

Nigel Kneale. Tomato Caine

William Kotzwinkle. Dr. Rat*

Jerry Kozinski. The Painted Bird*

Fritz Leiber. Our Lady of Darkness*

Ursula LeGuin. The Lathe of Heaven*; Orsinian Tales

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Ira Levin. Rosemary's Baby*; The Stepford Wives

John D. MacDonald. The Girl, the Gold Watch, and Everything

Bernard Malamud. The Magic Barrel*; The Natural

Robert Marasco. Burnt Offerings*

Gabriel Maria Marquez. One Hundred Years of Solitude

Richard Matheson. Hell House; I Am Legend*; Shock II; The Shrinking Man*; A Stir of Echoes

Michael McDowell. The Amulet*; Cold Moon Over Babylon*

Ian McEwen. The Cement Garden

John Metcalf. The Feasting Dead

Iris Murdoch. The Unicorn

Joyce Carol Oates. Nightside*

Flannery O'Connor. A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

Mervyn Peake. The Gormenghast Trilogy (3 volumes)

Thomas Pynchon. V.*

Edogawa Rampo. Tales of Mystery and Imagination

Jean Ray. Ghouls in My Grave

Anne Rice. Interview with the Vampire

Philip Roth. The Breast

Ray Russell. Sardonicus*

Joan Samson. The Auctioneer*

William Sansom. The Collected Stories of William Sansom

Sarban. Ringstones; The Sound of His Horn*

Anne Rivers Siddons. The House Next Door*

Isaac Bashevis Singer. The Seance and Other Stories*

Martin Cruz Smith. Nightwing

Peter Straub. Ghost Story*; If You Could See Me Now; Julia; Shadowland*

Theodore Sturgeon. Caviar; The Dreaming jewels; Some of Your Blood*

Thomas Tessier. The Nightwalker

Paul Theroux. The Black House

Thomas Tryon. The Other*

Les Whitten. Progeny of the Adder*

Thomas Williams. Tsuga's Children*

Gahan Wilson. I Paint What I See

T. M. Wright. Strange Seed*

John Wyndham. The Chrysalids; The Day of the Triffids*

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